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ISSUE 372
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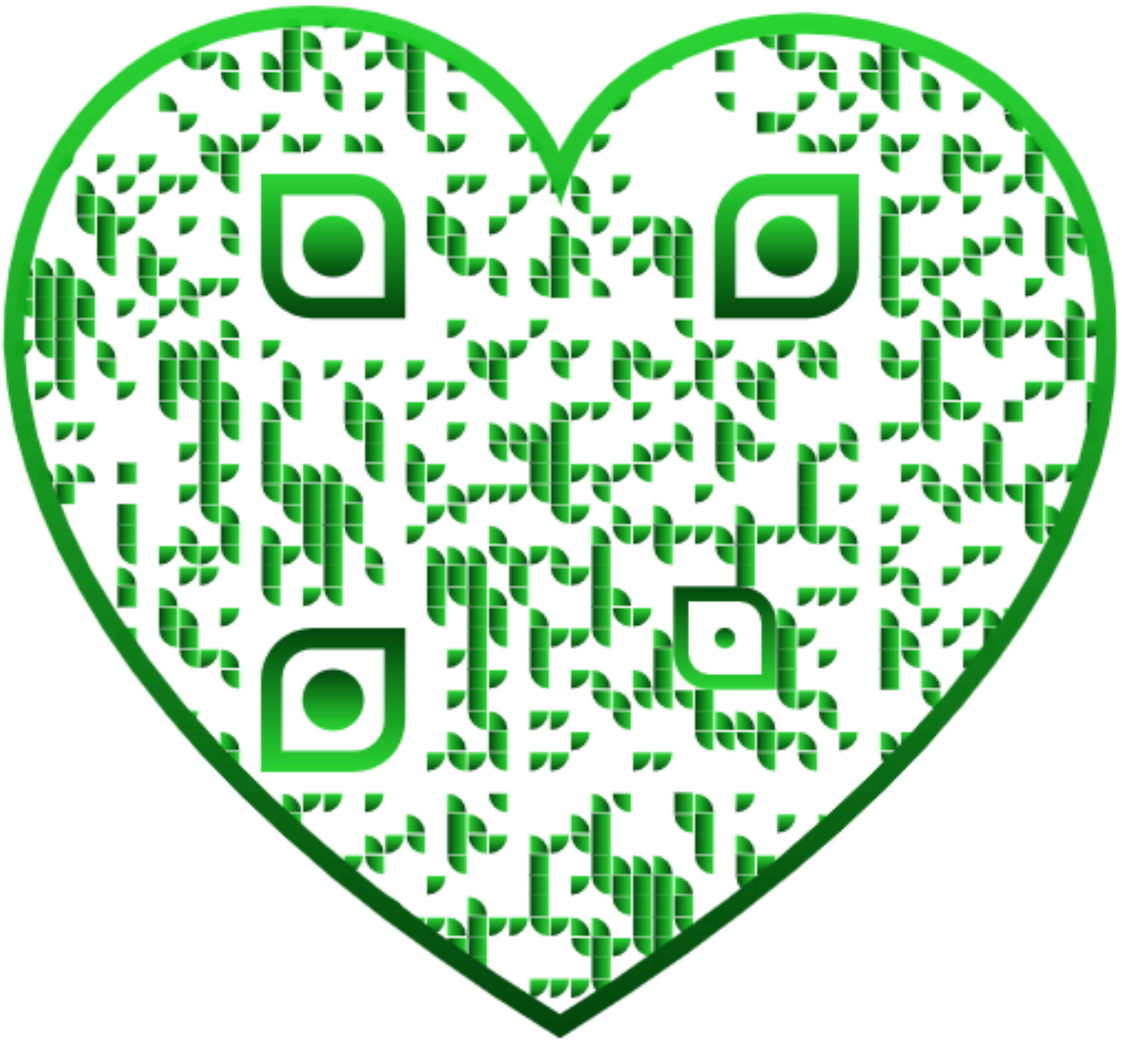

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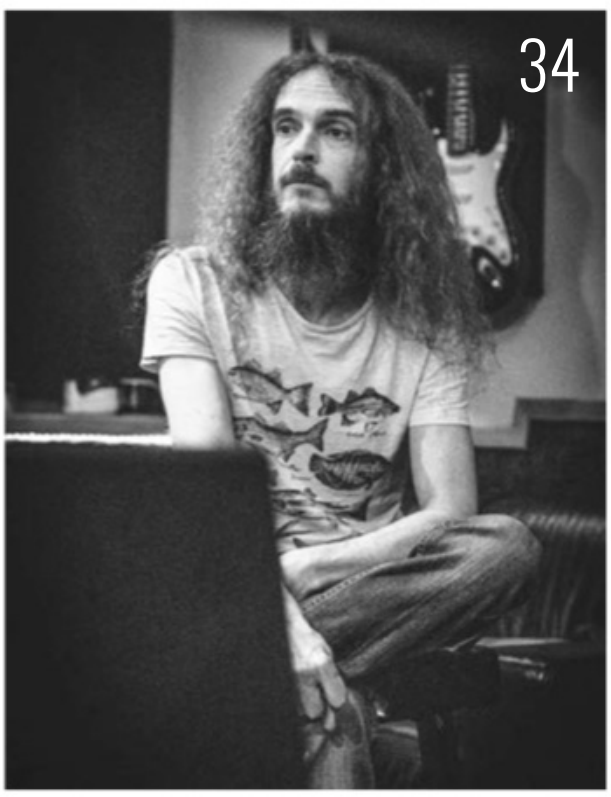
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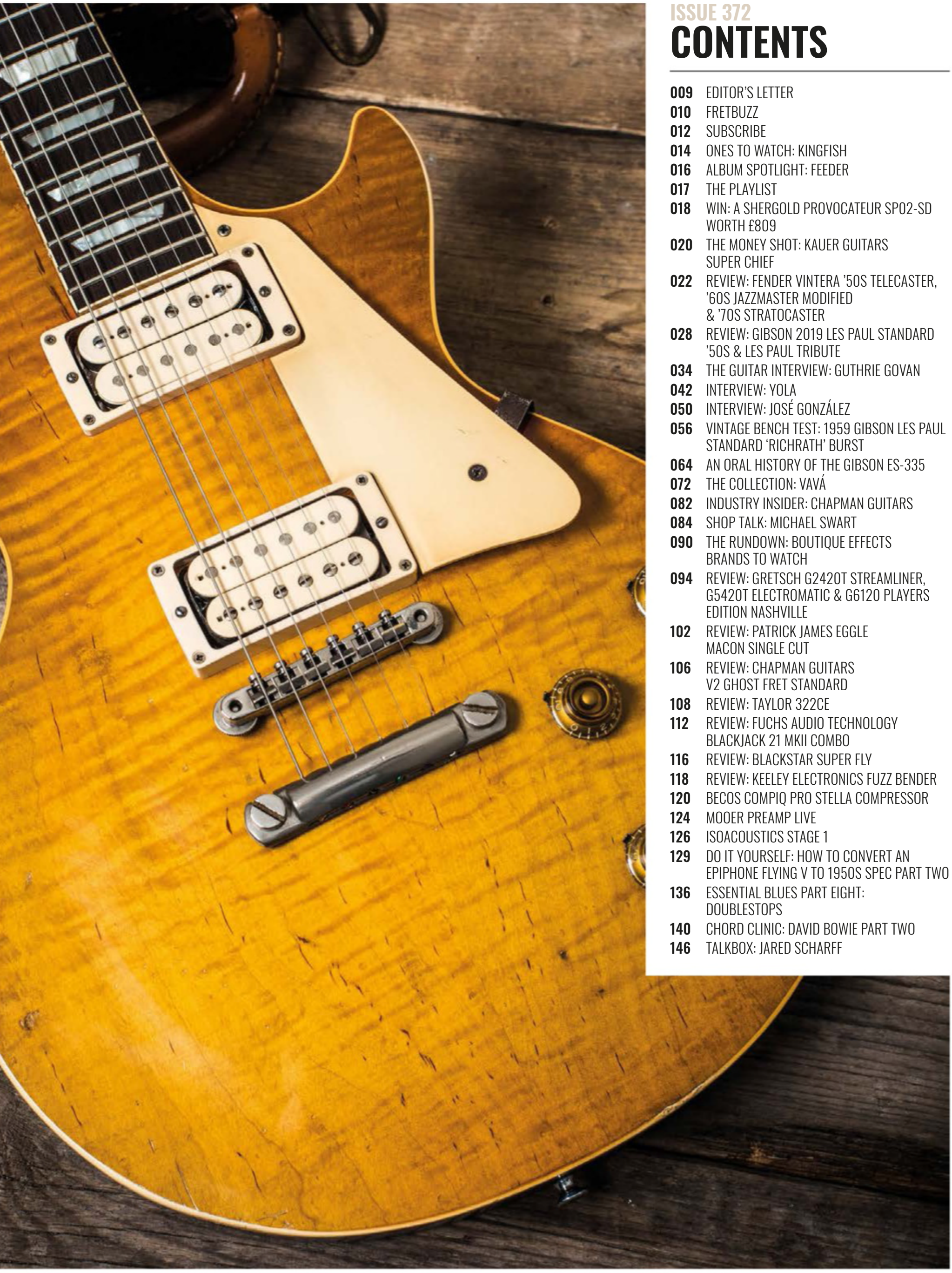

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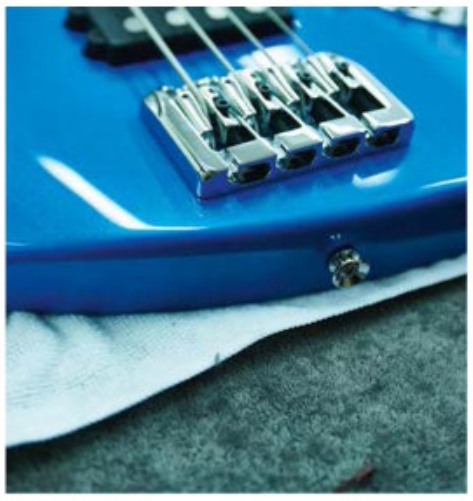

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EDITOR'S LETTER

MUSIC CITY

Well, it's certainly been a busy month. As I write this, I'm in the unglamorous end of a British Airways Dreamliner cruising at 40,000ft somewhere over Virginia. We're about to begin our descent into Nashville for the Summer NAMM show – an event that's gone from strength to strength in recent years, maintaining a healthy mixture of big brands and boutique builders and a considerably more intimate feel than the winter show in Anaheim.

By the time you read this, you'll doubtless be fully up to speed with all the new guitar, amp, effects and accessory releases from the show floor, but you can head to *Guitar.com* to catch up on all of our coverage and ensure there's nothing you missed.

If it's a deep dive you're looking for, then you've come to the right place – this month's new gear explosion sees us put Fender's retro Vintera Series to the test alongside hot new products from Gretsch, Taylor, Blackstar, Chapman, Gibson and more. Gibson has been in the news for its legal challenges of late, but head to p28 to find out what we think of the first production-line Les Pauls of the new era.

Elsewhere in the mag, we chat to a diverse bunch of artists, from guitar Jedi Guthrie Govan to country-soul superstar-in-waiting Yola, blues wunderkind Kingfish and LA songwriter Vanessa Wheeler, aka VAVÁ.

Just before we went to press, we learned of the sad death of legendary guitar tech Alan Rogan. Over the years, Alan tech'd for some of the world's biggest bands – The Stones and The Who among them – and I was once lucky enough to witness him holding court in a London pub, regaling this Beatles obsessive and others with tales of working with George Harrison. Wonderful stuff.

It wasn't just stars – Alan also helped up-and-coming builders by giving them access to vintage instruments. It's a testament to the man that so many industry luminaries and members of the extended *Guitar Magazine* family have expressed sadness at his passing. Our thoughts go out to Alan's friends and family.

Chris Vinnicombe
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FRETBUZZ

The *Guitar.com* inbox has been overflowing with readers weighing in on Gibson's 'Play Authentic' controversy, its legal dispute over the Flying V, Explorer and ES-335 body shapes with Dean Guitars owner Armadillo Industries, and its new 'Authorized Partnership Programme' to license Gibson designs to smaller makers. With such a broad spectrum of views on the saga, we felt it was only appropriate to let you have your say…

Join the conversation Email us at editors@guitar.com

IMAGE CONSCIOUS

This lawsuit will do no good for Gibson's image. Up till now, they have been on a straight course to build goodwill – they have introduced many instruments that are back to what made them great and priced them somewhat more reasonably. But Gibson is mistaken to believe that guitar players of all ages are not keenly aware of the differences between brands, regardless of the body shape. As a musician, I respect the rights of intellectual property, but if Gibson felt so strongly about this, they should have litigated 40 years ago. I do not understand what Gibson hopes to gain here.

MICHAEL JAMES, VIA EMAIL

During the 1980s, I often played a Dean ML. It was well built and was a real deal compared with the Gibsons at that time. Gibson has for too long been cruising on the reputation of the few-hundred guitars it made in the late 1950s and 60s.

MICHAEL BAKER, VIA EMAIL

IT'S ABOUT TIME

Maybe if these 'boutique' companies actually put in the work and came up with some original designs of their own, we wouldn't see so many court cases! How many Les Paul- and Strat-style guitars are on the market these days? All they're doing is using existing designs, which is essentially removing the hardest part of releasing any new product – coming up with an original product!

CHRIS TOFT, VIA FACEBOOK

I understand why others copy the iconic Gibson shapes. I don't really care for off-brand shapes; I suppose those classic designs are hardwired into me – but that's the reason that other companies copy them! I'm surprised Gibson hasn't done this earlier.

BOBBY GRAY, VIA EMAIL

I agree with the lawsuit against Armadillo. They are ripping off Gibson, and the fact that Dean has gotten away with it for

decades does not justify anything, to my mind. People need to come up with original designs, or at least do a deal and pay Gibson to use its designs, end of story.

HARLEY SAWATZKY, VIA EMAIL

I feel like if Gibson designed it and patented it, then it's their design, period! For Dean and others to say it's a common design is ridiculous – it's a common design for the simple reason that they all copied it!

GARY B, VIA EMAIL

MISTAKEN IDENTITY

As a lifetime player and Gibson lover I am appalled at their actions. It's an insult to us to say that we, as musicians, would look at, say, a Dean next to a Gibson and choose the Dean *thinking* it was a Gibson. Why are you jeopardising this fantastic wave of goodwill? You've generated an incredible turnaround by improving the quality control, listening to your customers and rethinking your entire production lineage. And now you do this?

MARK S, VIA EMAIL

For 30 years, I've owned Gibsons and I've owned similar guitars from Westfield, Vintage, Washburn, Hamer, Ibanez and more… and in all that time, I don't think anyone has ever thought that any of them were actual Gibson guitars. Gibson have lost the plot here!

MARK TULLY, VIA EMAIL

This is ridiculous! Hasn't Gibson ever heard the phrase 'imitation is the sincerest form of flattery'!? And aren't they bringing this up a bit late?

MARK WILSON, VIA EMAIL

I think it's a pretty tough sell to trademark something as generic as a guitar body shape. I've always loved Gibson and Fender, but those companies have to accept the classic shapes they brought us will be aped forever now. The way they stand out is to still be the best.

SAM CUMMINGS, VIA FACEBOOK

LEAVING IT LATE

I love everything about Gibson, but I have my questions about why they waited so long to do this. I've thought since I was a teenager that Dean was walking a fine line with those designs…

JIMMI ZEE, VIA EMAIL

Had Gibson filed this case 40 year ago, the suit would have had merit. Had they not themselves made the Epiphone S310, which is a spot-on Stratocaster clone, the suit would have had merit. They have decided to become a 'lifestyle brand' and charge exorbitant prices based on the goodwill of their name – and that goodwill is faltering.

JOSH FREEMAN, VIA EMAIL

IF YOU BUILD IT…

If Gibson spent half as much time on trying to deliver a quality product at a reasonable price point as they have with lawsuits, they wouldn't have to worry about the competition.

JESSE ANDERSON, VIA FACEBOOK

I don't care about lawsuits. I just want to see Gibson get back to making great guitars, and it looks like they are again!

SID WINEK, VIA FACEBOOK

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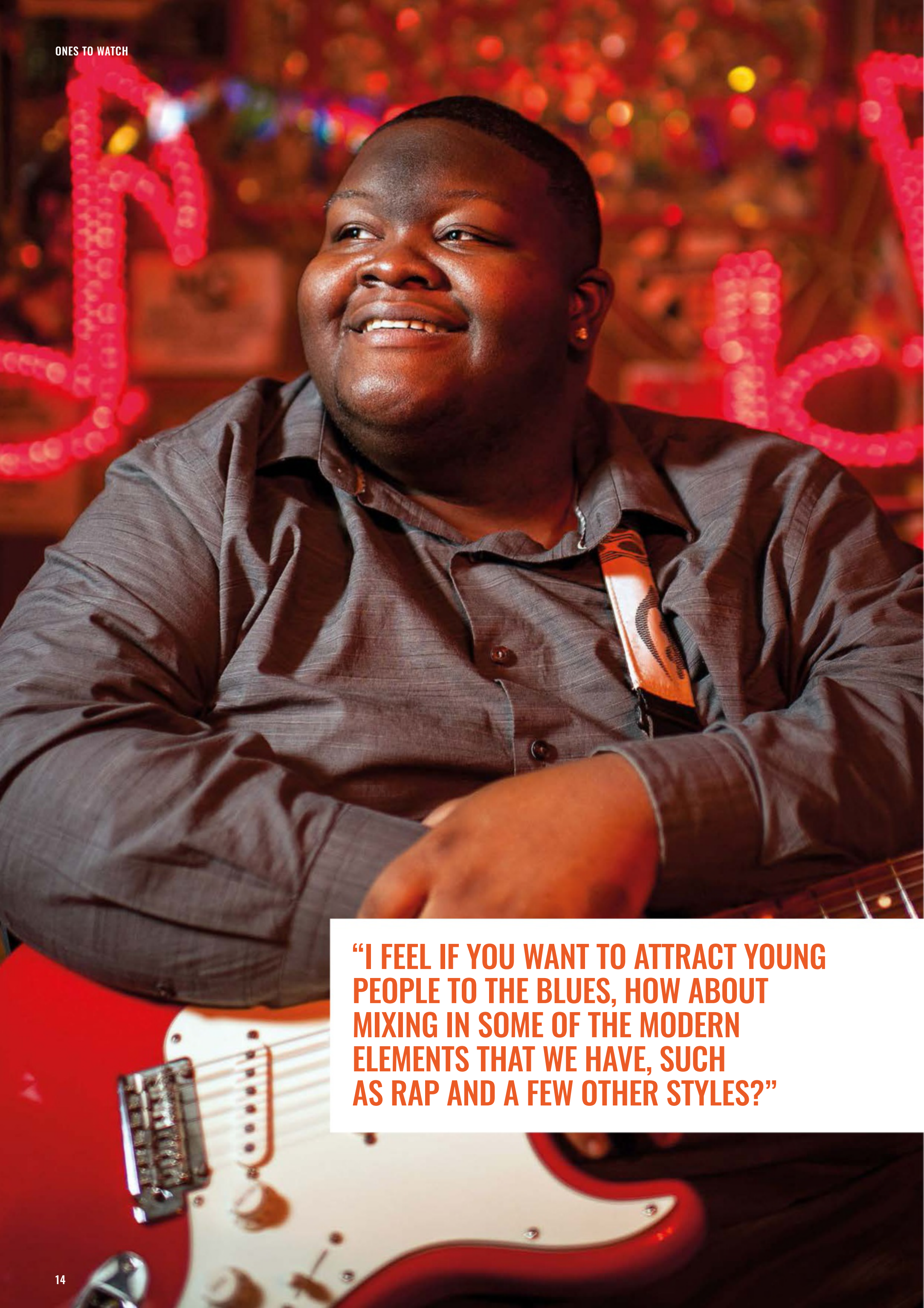

“I FEEL IF YOU WANT TO ATTRACT YOUNG PEOPLE TO THE BLUES, HOW ABOUT MIXING IN SOME OF THE MODERN ELEMENTS THAT WE HAVE, SUCH AS RAP AND A FEW OTHER STYLES?”

ONES TO WATCH

KINGFISH @_THEYCALLMEKINGFISH

INTERVIEW ALISON RICHTER **PHOTOGRAPHY** RORY DOYLE

The 20-year-old guitar prodigy tells us how growing up in the birthplace of the blues makes him the perfect candidate for modernising the genre…

There's a great line in your bio: "I'm moving forward with one foot in the past."
"The tradition is always going to be there. That's the root for everything. But I feel if you want to attract young people to the blues, how about mixing in some of the modern elements that we have, such as rap and a few other styles? Once we get them in, then we can show them the real deal and show them the history. That's what I'm trying to do."

You started out on drums, moved on to bass and then to guitar. How did those instruments shape you as a guitarist?
"It teaches you discipline and you have to have pocket. So I incorporate that in my rhythm-guitar playing. When I'm playing funk riffs, I try to keep that pocket and keep that groove on without being too fancy."

How has your playing developed?
"My singing has grown, for sure, because I have more confidence in my voice. It's bassier now and more smooth. I'm not a shredder like I used to be. I play more tastefully now and my musical knowledge is growing every day. I'm learning theory, so everything is coming in better than it had been three years ago."

You were a shredder? What reined you in?
"Listening to all the lectures I was getting from all the OGs! That, and looking at people's comments and stuff like that. I was getting a lot of, "Man, you're good, but you need to slow down." Even players who played fast were telling me to slow down! I counted it as [constructive] criticism."

Your Mike Chertoff Custom has been your number-one guitar since 2016…
"In 2015, when a video of me went viral, I started getting a lot of different companies coming at me and sending me stuff. Mike Chertoff was one of those who contacted me, and I liked what he was doing. He kept saying: 'I'm going to send you a guitar one day, man!' He had that LP-style guitar built already and he finished it for me and sent it to me a week before I had to play in Germany. I loved it. That's what got me back into LPs and it has been my number one ever since."

What do you look for in a guitar?
"For one, it's got to have weight. I'm a big dude and if I play something light, I don't want to break it. I'm hard on instruments, so it has to have weight and the neck has to be wide – and that [Chertoff] guitar had all the qualities. It's beefier than Strats and Teles and that's a sound that I'm drawn to. The Teles are more trebly. I want that when I'm playing for quiet moments, when I'm playing clean or light or really funky."

What were the recording sessions for your debut album *Kingfish* like for you?
"I've always liked putting a baffle on my amp. I had studio experience, but this was the second time in my life that I was actually going in the studio and recording something for me, so I was a little bit nervous. It took us three days on the music, one day on all the vocals and a whole lot of overdubbing: I like to overdub my solos."

What else did you use on the album, and what's in your live rig?
"I used a Peavey Delta Blues 210 and a Fender Twin. I used my Chertoff Custom because I wasn't playing Strats at the time. I used a Goldtop Les Paul on some of the solos. For pedals, I used the EWS Brute Drive and I was stacking it with an Ibanez Tube Screamer; I used a Klon clone as well. Live, I use a Peavey Delta Blues 210 or a Peavey Classic or any Fender Twin, an MXR Sugar Drive and a Cry Baby Mini Wah with a Boss tuner. I'm just starting back to adding delay, a Way Huge Aqua-Puss, Pig Hog cables, Strats and my Chertoff Custom."

What's your definition of 'tone'?
"How you sound, how pleasing it is to your ears. I'm drawn to a beefier, fatter, Gary Moore type of thing. Before that, I was into lighter tones. I was using the bridge pickup on the Strat and I was turning the tone up in my pedals, so who knows – in the future, I might go back to the lighter things. It's all about what you're comfortable with."

Kingfish's eponymous debut is out now on Alligator Records

THE PLAYLIST

ALBUM SPOTLIGHT

FEEDER TALLULAH

INTERVIEW JOSH GARDNER **PHOTOGRAPHY** ELEANOR JANE

Grant Nicholas of Feeder picks his guitar highlights from the Welsh/Japanese rockers' 10th studio album, *Tallulah*

Feeder have followed their recent *Best Of* with their first new studio album in five years. Here, guitarist/frontman Grant Nicholas pinpoints five standout guitar moments from *Tallulah*…

KYOTO

"This was one of the last songs I wrote for *Tallulah*. I really wanted a classic riff-driven anthemic song to lift the dynamic in the second half of the album. It's classic old-school Feeder with a slight homage to 70s rock. Lyrically, it's about my love affair with Japan and Japanese culture. The main guitar tone was created using my usual Tone Benders, Big Muff and Pete Cornish fuzz boxes. All the guitars were recorded at my studio, the Treehouse, through a Vox blue-speaker AC30, a Fender Hot Rod DeVille and a Marshall JMP 50-watt head. My main guitars were a 1959 Jazzmaster, a custom ESP guitar that was made for me – it's basically an SG-Mustang – and a Gibson J-45 and 1964 Guild M-20."

FEAR OF FLYING

"I really like the blend of distorted and chorus guitars on this. I tend to use chorus guitar sounds quite a bit in general and used a Memory Man to create this sound. Again, I used the Fender '59 Jazzmaster, ESP custom and a Rebirth relic Jazz/Tele-style custom guitar that Taka loaned me."

LONELY HOLLOW DAYS

"This is the only real acoustic song on the album and has my usual fingerpicked style. I've always loved Nick Drake and his music has influenced me a lot over the years. This fingerpicked folk style features a lot on my solo album *Yorktown Heights* and the mini-album *Black Clouds*. I wanted the song to have an organic honesty and feel. This was recorded on my 1967 Gibson J-45."

TALLULAH

"This sound was created using a tracked acoustic and electric guitar part, which set the mood for the song, which I had originally written on acoustic guitar. Again, this was recorded mainly with a Gibson J-45 and Fender 1959 Jazzmaster. I used my usual Vox and Fender DeVille combination, with some Marshall added in the heavier sections."

WINDMILL

"This is a real nod to my earlier Feeder tone and arrangement. I found myself journeying back to *Polythene* and tried to create an anthemic landscape with a big guitar dynamic that just lifts you up and fills the space. It touches on escapism, the human mind and the vastness of the universe. I remember writing some of the lyrics on the Kent coastline, while waiting to play the Wheels And Fins Festival, on our tour bus. Guitar-wise, it was mainly my trusty '59 Jazzmaster and the ESP custom through a cranked up Marshall 1970s JMP 50, which I've been using since recording *Swim* and *Polythene* and is on pretty much all the Feeder stuff."

Feeder's *Tallulah* is out 9 August on Believe

This month's essential tracks for guitar lovers…

JOSH RITTER
The Torch Committee
The Americana artist's 10th LP was produced by Nashville's king-in-waiting Jason Isbell. The title track is politically charged with intricate acoustics.

OPETH
Heart In Hand
The lead single from the Swedish prog-metal band's forthcoming LP *In Cauda Venenum* showcases monstrous riffery and dynamic shifts throughout.

HENRY'S FUNERAL SHOE
Everybody Says Hi
The Welsh blues-rockers' new album *Smartphone Rabbit Hole* contains this rousing, old-school-blues-inspired single, laden with fuzz and a pulsating backbeat.

TWO DAY COMA
Afraid Of Ghosts
The Bristolian indie heartthrobs' third single from their forthcoming EP features plucked acoustic and sweet slide, supporting Tom Harris's introspective turn of phrase.

YOLA
Faraway Look
Interviewed on p42 of this issue, Yola's single *Faraway Look* blends sophisticated Americana with Spector-esque string arrangements.

THE ARISTOCRATS
Spanish Eddie
This unabashed prog moment from guitar virtuoso Guthrie Govan's instrumental three-piece is the perfect gateway to what this band are all about.

VAVÁ
The Other Side
Vanessa Wheeler is the subject of this month's collection on p72. Hear her idiosyncratic guitars in full force on the brilliant *The Other Side*.

CHRISTONE "KINGFISH" INGRAM
Fresh Out
Touted as the next big breakout blues act, Kingfish plays with a maturity that belies his 20 years. *Fresh Out* displays his BB King-inspired vocals and monster playing.

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Two years on from the revival of cult British brand Shergold Guitars, which utilises the formidable design skills of esteemed luthier Patrick James Eggle, the latest model to hit the streets is the Provocateur.

While we were suitably impressed by the Masquerader – a debut model for the relaunched brand which was heavily inspired by its 1970s predecessor – the Provocateur adds even more crowd-pleasing features such as a mahogany body and neck, two zebra-covered humbuckers and a comfortable single-cut body shape.

The Provocateur also features an ebony fretboard and an oversized cream Telecaster Deluxe-style pickguard, contrasting beautifully with the effortlessly cool Battleship Grey paint job.

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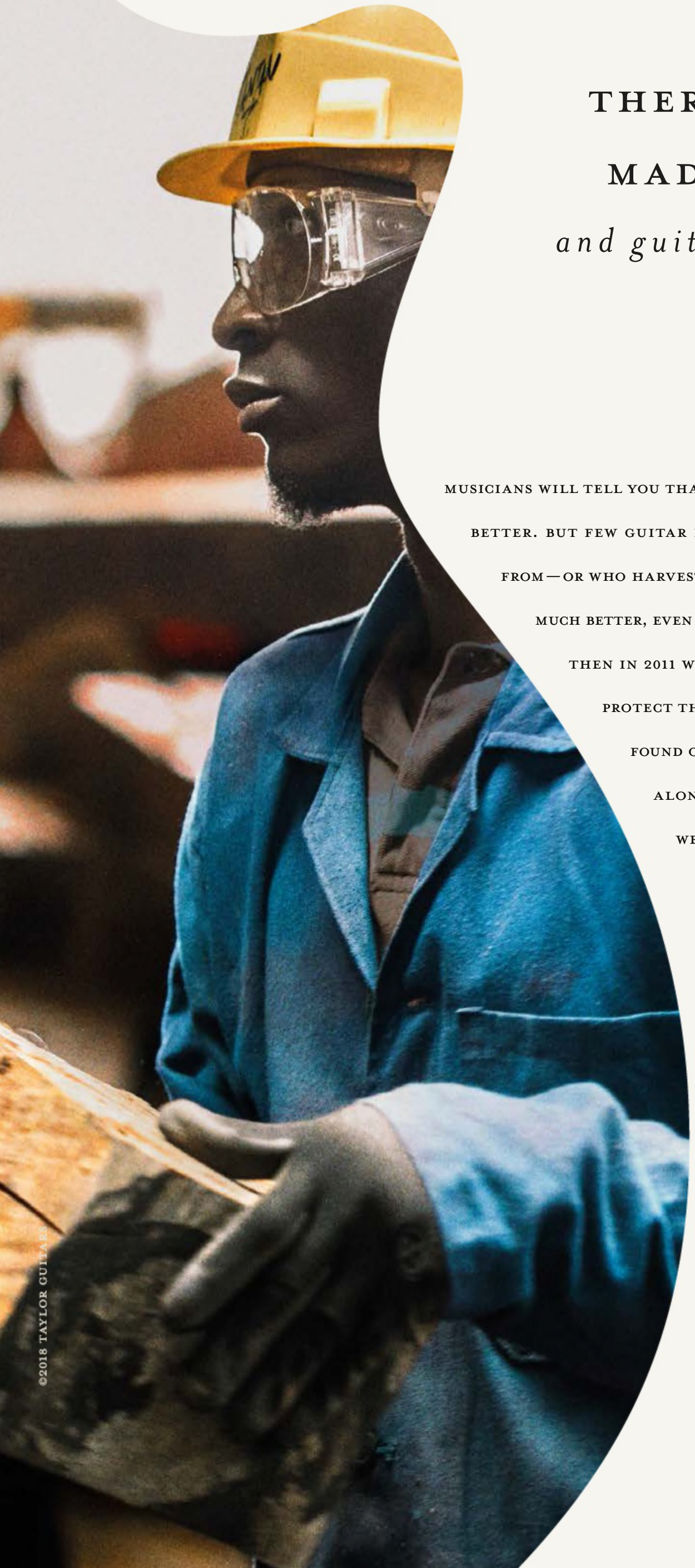

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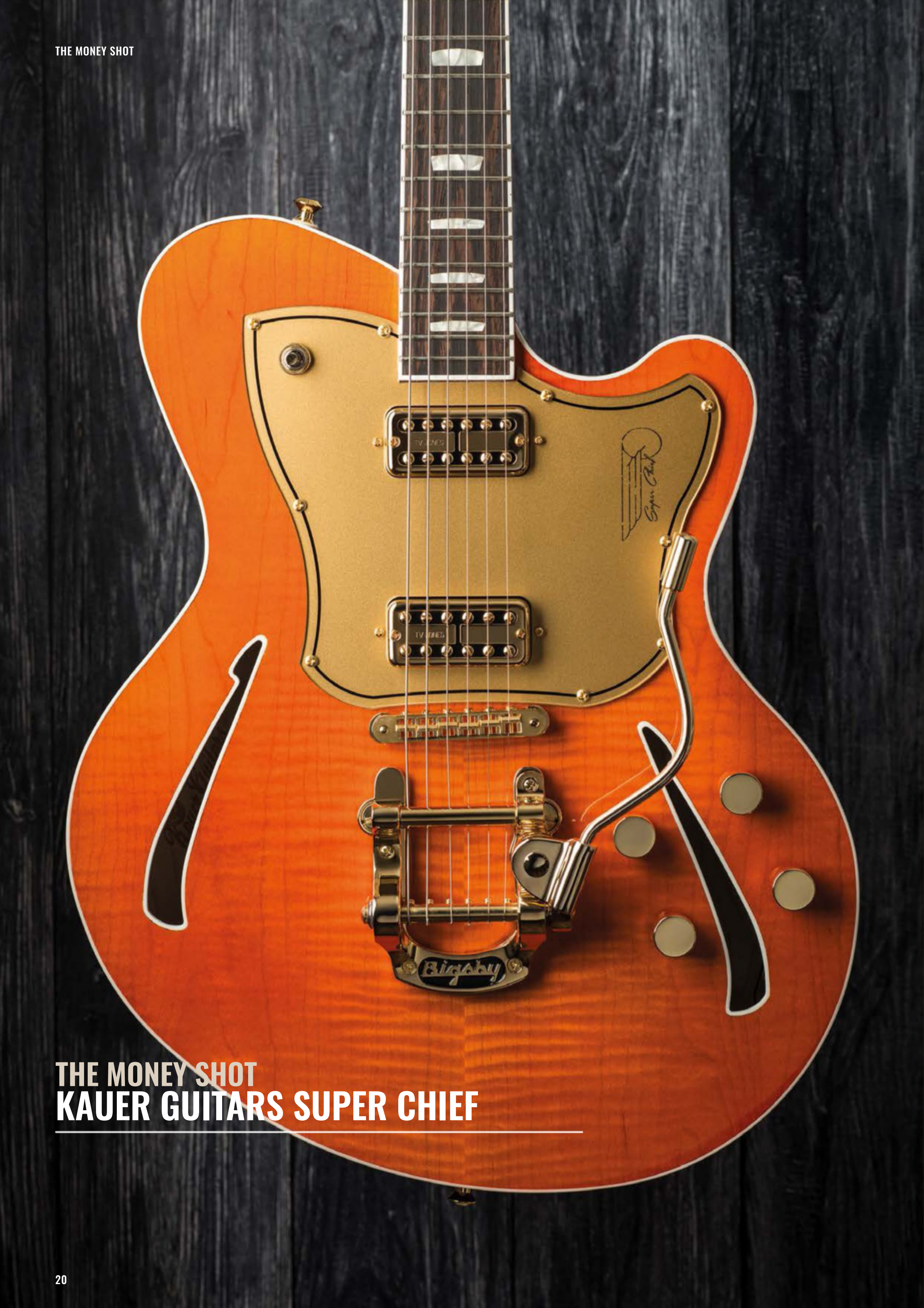

THE MONEY SHOT
KAUER GUITARS SUPER CHIEF

Based in Elk Grove, just south of Sacramento in Northern California, Kauer Guitars makes a range of vintage-inspired electric guitars with a twist that's found favour with Rival Sons star Scott Holiday, who liked his first Super Chief so much he recently took delivery of a double-neck version.

Available from The North American Guitar in London, this particular Super Chief retails for £4,250 and wears its Gretschiness firmly on its sleeve. With a 15.5-inch semi-hollow body, this Round Up Orange stunner comes loaded with TV Jones Power'Trons and features a figured maple top and back, with a Spanish mahogany core. The Chet Atkins Bigsby arm adds an extra touch of class to an instrument with plenty of retro appeal that can also rock out with the best of them. G

Visit thenorthamericanguitar.com to find out more about this guitar and see more of Doug Kauer's fabulous creations

VOLUME
TONE
TONE
VOLUME

Vintage Revisited

Consolidating upgraded Classic Series and Classic Player models under one banner might not sound like the most headline-grabbing launch in Fender's recent history. But you can be sure that the vintage-inspired, real-world instruments in the Vintera Series will sell by the truckload to players looking for their first serious electric guitar or bass. Time to take a trip through three decades of tone in a custom-colour candy store…

WORDS CHRIS VINNICOMBE

The last few years have seen Fender work its way through its extensive catalogue, reorganising and revamping at key price points. With the American Performer, Professional, Original and Elite lines now bang up to date, the company's big launch for Summer 2019 is Vintera – 21 vintage-inspired electric guitars and basses made in the coastal Mexican city of Ensenada, available in a rainbow of vintage hues and priced between £689-999.

If some of the Vintera Series instruments (vintage… era… geddit?) look especially familiar, it's because Vintera is essentially an amalgam of the old Classic Series and Classic Player Series. Popular models such as the Baja Telecaster and Classic Player Jazzmaster survive here, albeit in updated and rebadged form. In this first look at the 2019 range, we've got our hands on the '50s Telecaster, '60s Jazzmaster Modified and '70s Stratocaster.

The Vintera Series can be split broadly into two, based on whether a model has 'Modified' in its name. Like their Classic Series forebears, the 15 models that aren't 'Modified' cherry-pick features from a particular decade, rather than zeroing in on a specific model year. As you might expect, at this end of the catalogue we're not talking about forensic vintage recreations and a certain degree of pragmatism has been applied to the specifications on offer.

On our '50s Telecaster, for example, you'll find a 7.25-inch fingerboard radius and a fat U-shaped neck with a revamped carve, but the alder body and maple neck are finished in gloss polyester and urethane

ABOVE The Vintera ’60s Jazzmaster Modified, resplendent in Surf Green

OPPOSITE TOP The ’70s Strat’s large headstock features a ‘bullet’ truss-rod nut

OPPOSITE BOTTOM Our review guitar is finished in Sienna Sunburst, but it also comes in Aged Natural and Mocha

respectively and the wiring is sensibly the ‘modern’ circuit that has been standard on Telecasters since late 1967.

The six Modified instruments throw even more modernity into the mix, as evidenced by our review Jazzmaster. Like the 2008 Classic Player guitar from which it evolved, the Vintera ’60s JM Modified shifts the vibrato tailpiece closer to the bridge, increasing the break angle and therefore sustain, while the bridge itself is Fender’s ABR-1-style Adjusto-Matic.

The Modified model’s neck is finished in satin urethane and in combination with medium-jumbo frets, a Modern ‘C’ neck profile and 9.5-inch/241mm fingerboard radius, it offers a less old-school playing experience than its more vintage-faithful sibling, the Vintera ’60s Jazzmaster (£899).

The third guitar of our review trio is a love letter to the 1970s with its ‘bullet’ truss-rod nut and F-stamped tuners adorning a suitably oversized headstock on a three-bolt neck. At a hair under 8lb, our review model sadly doesn’t offer the unadulterated late-70s boat-anchor experience, but that’s almost certainly a good thing.

Once again, we have cause to reminisce about a long-lost and truly wonderful sunburst ’74 Strat with a seemingly never-ending stream of songs in it, but that’s a story for another day. Back here in 2019, in similar fashion to the Jazzmaster, the ’70s Stratocaster’s fingerboard is a CITES-friendly slab of pau ferro, although the offset model’s ’board is slightly redder in hue.

KEY FEATURES

VINTERA ’60S JAZZMASTER MODIFIED
PRICE £899 (inc. gigbag)
DESCRIPTION Double-cutaway offset solidbody electric guitar. Made in Mexico
BUILD Alder body, modern C-shaped maple neck with 9.5" (241mm) radius pau ferro fingerboard and 21 medium-jumbo frets. Synthetic bone nut
HARDWARE 6-saddle Adjusto-Matic bridge with vintage-style floating vibrato tailpiece, vintage-style machineheads
ELECTRICS 2x Vintage-Style ’60s Single-Coil Hot Jazzmaster pickups, volume, tone, 3-way toggle pickup selector switch, lead/rhythm circuit slider switch, 2x thumbwheels for rhythm-circuit volume and tone
SCALE LENGTH 25.5"/648mm
NECK WIDTH 41.6mm at nut, 51.6mm at 12th fret
NECK DEPTH 20.8mm at first fret, 22.1mm at 12th fret
STRING SPACING 35.2mm at nut, 51.3mm at bridge
WEIGHT 8.1lb/3.67kg
FINISH Surf Green (as reviewed), 3-Colour Sunburst

8/10 **The Classic Player Jazzmaster returns rebadged with a host of inspirational tones**

Fender's new 'vintage' tint on the maple necks of its Vintera instruments is a definite improvement – it's a more tasteful caramel compared to the yellow-orange hues of the Classic Series – while the thin gloss urethane finishes on the Strat and Tele necks have a slight stickiness that's almost reminiscent of lacquer buffed to a high sheen. The Telecaster's one-piece neck, with its subtle ripple of flame, is the pick of the bunch.

When it came to Vintera's electronics, Fender again turned to Tim Shaw, the mastermind behind the pickups on most of its major launches over the last few years. "I voiced the '50s Tele pickups more like later-50s pickups, with alnico V magnets instead of the alnico III used on the earliest models," Shaw explains. "Alnico V is a brighter-sounding magnet and that tonality tends to appeal more to modern players and works better with modern equipment.

"The 60s Jazzmasters in general had consistent pickups," he continues, "so our '60s Jazzmaster is a pretty typical example of those specs. The Modified version has a bit more wire on each coil and works better with the thinner strings today's players use on a Jazzmaster.

"By the 70s, Fender had gone to a flat-stagger magnet set on the Stratocaster, where all six magnets were the same height. These pickups have a more solid sound with thicker mids and less 'chime' than the earlier versions. It was very interesting to play the Strats in the Vintera series in historical order, just to hear how those voicings shifted with time!"

IN USE

After orienting our ears with a very good ash body/maple 'board Custom Shop Strat, we switch to the '70s Vintera model and find the sonic gap isn't perhaps as wide as the considerable gulf in price. Sure, the CS model is woodier and more expressive, with more zing into the bargain, but within seconds of wrapping our left hand around the nicely rounded neck (arguably more appealing than that of many 70s originals), we're enjoying the Vintera's percussive, funky character.

It's more nasal, with mellower highs, likely due to the influence of the fingerboard material as well as the pickup voicing. That said, there's still plenty of harmonic interest and the tones certainly aren't one-dimensional, although most of the airy treble action lives between 10 and 8.5 on the volume knob – its taper is pretty steep. Although the factory stringing method does little to reduce friction at the second/first (B/E) string tree, the three-spring vibrato setup floats beautifully and the arm has less unwanted play than our Custom Shop unit. The fret ends have been rounded smoothly and simple tweaks such as breaking the 'board edges on the bass side and better wrapping of the treble strings around the tuner posts would elevate playability considerably.

KEY FEATURES

VINTERA '70S STRATOCASTER
PRICE £769 (inc. gigbag)
DESCRIPTION Double-cutaway electric guitar. Made in Mexico
BUILD Ash body, early 70s C maple neck with 7.25" (184.1mm) radius pau ferro fingerboard and 21 vintage-style frets. Synthetic bone nut
HARDWARE 6-saddle vintage-style synchronised vibrato bridge, Fender Vintage F-stamped machineheads
ELECTRICS 3x Vintage-Style '70s Single-Coil Strat pickups, master volume, neck pickup tone, middle pickup tone, 5-way blade selector switch
SCALE LENGTH 25.5"/648mm
NECK WIDTH 41.9mm at nut, 51.8mm at 12th fret
NECK DEPTH 22.5mm at first fret, 23.7mm at 12th fret
STRING SPACING 35.2mm at nut, 54.6mm at bridge
WEIGHT 7.96lb/3.61kg
FINISH Sienna Sunburst (as reviewed), Aged Natural, Mocha

8/10 **70s Strats polarise opinion, but here's one worth getting to grips with**

ABOVE The Vintera '50s Telecaster in Fiesta Red – an understated tone machine

OPPOSITE TOP The Tele sports a vintage-style bridge arrangement with three brass saddles

OPPOSITE BOTTOM Vintage-style machineheads complete the Vintera Tele's classic look

Switching to the Jazzmaster winds the clock forward, at least in terms of the playing experience. The bigger frets, flatter 'board and slim, satin-finished neck mean that runs and bends in higher registers require far less effort from your fretting hand, but the trade-off is that the feel is rather more generic.

Happily, the tones are anything but, and there's a range of beguiling sounds on offer that are simultaneously classic and contemporary. They may be voiced to work a little harder in deference to modern string gauges, but there's still plenty of air in these pickups and they don't sound overcooked.

Once you've got past the inevitable spring reverb/tremolo/spy-movie soundtrack tropes, there's a tonne of compositional inspiration to be found here and don't discount that rhythm circuit – it's smooth and moody rather than muddy and hugely enjoyable into ambience as well as fuzz. While the Strat sees us going through the motions somewhat, the Jazzmaster is one of those guitars on which you find yourself composing, rather than noodling.

Our next stop in the Vintera time machine is the 1950s. It's an overused word, but the alnico V Telecaster pickups deliver tremendous clarity. Whether your Tele tone tastes veer towards Bloomfield or Bakersfield, there's plenty of cut, but it's the desirable, musical kind.

The much-maligned Telecaster neck pickup performs superbly here, too, with Bill Frisell-style excursions ringing bell-like with superb articulation and a nicely even decay. The factory 0.009-0.042 strings and glossy fingerboard promote big bends,

KEY FEATURES

VINTERA '50S TELECASTER
PRICE £749 (inc. gigbag)
DESCRIPTION Single-cutaway solidbody electric guitar. Made in Mexico
BUILD Alder body, early 50s U-shaped maple neck with 7.25" (184.1mm) fingerboard radius and 21 vintage-style frets. Synthetic bone nut
HARDWARE 3x brass saddle string-through-body bridge, vintage-style machineheads
ELECTRICS 2x Vintage-Style Single-Coil Tele pickups, master volume, master tone, 3-way blade pickup selector switch
SCALE LENGTH 25.5"/648mm
NECK WIDTH 42.2mm at nut, 51.6mm at 12th fret
NECK DEPTH 23.3mm at first fret, 25.0mm at 12th fret
STRING SPACING 35.4mm at nut, 54.3mm at bridge
WEIGHT 7.46lb/3.38kg
FINISH Fiesta Red (as reviewed), 2-Colour Sunburst, Sonic Blue
CONTACT Fender EMEA fender.com

9/10 **A no-nonsense vintage-style Telecaster with classy tones and a sumptuous neck**

while the small frets and 7.25-inch 'board radius aren't the barrier to faux pedal-steel licks that they might be if this guitar was strung with a set of 0.011s.

Stepping on an old Tube Screamer proves fruitful, too, with vocal bridge-pickup lead tones and Black Keys-style raunch at the neck. There's no getting away from it – three-saddle bridges are a compromise when it comes to intonation, but it isn't a major issue in day-to-day playing and compensated saddles are a cheap and straightforward upgrade.

Though the '60s Jazzmaster Modified and '70s Stratocaster are both fine instruments, it's the '50s Telecaster that we'd take home. With the kind of characterfully chunky neck you don't see too often at this end of the market, plus an addictive combination of power and clarity (there's that c-word again), it's every inch a serious guitar.

The prices of Fender's Mexican-made reissue models may have crept up a little, but Tim Shaw and the rest of the Fender R&D team have delivered improvements where they count. **G**

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

Vintage V65V ReIssued Series **£329**, G&L USA Fullerton Standard Legacy **£999**, Maybach Teleman T54 **£1,530**

PICKUP LINES

FENDER'S IN-HOUSE ELECTRONICS GURU TIM SHAW ON HOW THE EVOLUTION OF FENDER'S GOLDEN-ERA PICKUPS INFORMED VINTERA SERIES R&D

"As with the American Original series we launched last year, we had models defined by and divided into various eras of Fender history. Particularly in the 50s, there were a lot of subtle variations in the pickups as the models evolved. Part of the challenge was in deciding the best specs to use for particular pickups out of the many possible variations.

"We decided to use Formvar wire for the 50s pickups, because it was the most common for Fender in that era, though plain enamel wire was also available then. The coating on Formvar is the thickest of any coating we use and this changes a property of pickups called distributed capacitance. Simply put, pickups wound with Formvar seem to have more 'air' in them.

"By 1963, Fender had pretty much changed over to plain enamel-coated magnet wire, and this coating is a bit thinner than Formvar. These pickups don't have quite that amount of 'air' and Fender was also putting a bit more wire on the coils. The overall tone has a bit less chime and a bit more focus. In the 70s, Fender had switched to a polyurethane-coated wire, as had many other companies. It had the thinnest coating of any of these magnet wires, so the sound is a bit more focused yet.

"Most of the magnets Fender used during these periods were alnico V, although the height-stagger patterns varied a bit. We chose the most period-correct dimensions for these. The way the different magnet heights interact with the strings is another component in the tone of the pickup and the guitar.

"But since these guitars and basses didn't need to be direct copies of a particular instrument, we could follow some concepts I've employed on other Fender pickup series recently – they're voiced for each model and its intended musical purpose, they're voiced for a specific position on that model and whenever possible, they're hum-cancelling.

"As a designer, you have to understand what elements drive cost in a factory. These can be materials or specifications, but they can also be production processes that affect the time it takes to build parts. By making the pickups in the Vintera Series era-specific, we were able to reduce the total number of parts and specs, which helped in the overall cost calculations."

GIBSON

2019 LES PAUL STANDARD '50S & LES PAUL TRIBUTE

From the Original and Modern Collections comes a pair of new production Les Pauls that might just prove less is more…

WORDS CHRIS VINNICOMBE

It all seemed like it was going rather well for Gibson. Rejuvenated under new ownership and with fresh investment, the goodwill generated by the company's NAMM Show return in January was palpable. Led by former Levi's main man JC Curleigh, Gibson seemed ready to move forward, focus on making great guitars again and exorcise the ghosts of the latter part of Henry Juszkiewicz's troubled reign.

Then came June, *that* Mark Agnesi video, and a laundry list of news stories about trademark infringement, litigation, counter-claims, statements about "shifting from confrontation to collaboration," and a lot more besides. And as we type this, a week or so prior to Summer NAMM, it looks like it'll be some time before the dust settles. However, away from the lurid social-media posts and the sound of hundreds of lawyers rubbing their hands together with glee, there's the small matter of some electric guitars to write about. After all, that's what got us here in the first place.

In July, we featured Gibson Custom's flagship 2019 model, the 60th Anniversary 1959 Les Paul Standard. Now it's time to check out what the production-line Original and Modern Collections have to offer.

FACTORY RECORDS

Back in April, we flew out to see Gibson in Nashville and witnessed first-hand the improvements that have already taken place under the watchful eye of new chief merchant officer Cesar Gueikian. Simple things – better lighting and extraction, more efficient workflows – have already had a positive effect on

ABOVE Les Pauls in various stages of undress on the Gibson factory floor in Nashville

the factory floor and when we visited, there was a buzz of positivity about the place and a palpable excitement about the company's new lines.

For 2019, Gibson's electric-guitar output is split into the Original Collection, the Modern Collection and Gibson Custom. The Original and Modern Collection instruments are made at the company's 'Gibson USA' plant on Massman Drive in the eastern part of the city, near the airport; the Custom division is situated just over a mile away on Elm Hill Pike.

During our visit, Cesar walked us through the Original Collection. "This is where we look back and pay tribute to our iconic past and bring those classic models back," he explained. "It's our way of celebrating our past, our legacy and our heritage. None of these guitars are chambered, they are all solid, just like we did them back in the 50s."

As we're shown around, we notice a few nods to the nerds, such as skinnier fingerboard binding on the Les Paul Standard '50s and '60s. "We went for thinner binding generally in everything we're doing in the Original Collection, including the SGs," reveals the CMO. "It's closer to what the classic models were, it's more authentic, it's what we did back then. There was no science to what we were doing in the 50s, you see variations on original models – the thin binding is definitely more consistent in terms of what we did in the late 50s and so we've gone there."

Specification changes aren't just aesthetic: "Everything we're doing in the Original Collection is hand-wired with Orange Drop capacitors. We particularly focused on the audio taper, to not bring output down when it cleans up the sound."

With weight relief off the table for the Original Collection instruments, we wonder if sourcing lightweight mahogany for the range has been a challenge. Cesar says no: "We have a long term, steady source of mahogany. A couple of years ago, we did a deal with the government of Fiji, so we're in a really good position today, as we have several years of what I would consider to be lightweight mahogany."

ON THE RANGE

If the Original Collection is about delivering instruments that don't force innovation down people's throats, the Modern Collection gives Gibson licence to experiment. However, alongside more tricked-out models such as the Les Paul Modern, you'll also find the most accessibly priced LPs in the new catalogue.

ABOVE The Les Paul Tribute in Satin Tobacco Burst is weight relieved and features a maple neck

Upgraded from the recent Les Paul Studio Tribute, the new Les Paul Tribute model features crowns rather than dots and covered rather than uncovered humbuckers, while you also get the chunkier strap buttons that Gibson has used extensively of late. The mahogany body is also weight relieved.

The exposed edges of the plain maple top create a faux-bound effect that complements the golden-brown tone of the maple neck, while the Satin Tobacco Burst is joined in the range by three other satin options that ape the various stages of Burst fade: Iced Tea, Honeyburst and Cherry Sunburst.

Turning our attention to the Standard – which has much in common with the previous Traditional model – there's a hard brown case this time, rather than a deluxe gigbag, with a handle that's considerably more comfortable than they were in the 1950s, with more reliable clasps and plush red lining.

When it comes to the guitar inside, you get gloss lacquer, real binding and a striking figured top instead of the Tribute's plain grain. Strap buttons revert to daintier, vintage-style units, but it's not exactly a tough mod if you prefer something more secure.

With no weight relief and a one-piece mahogany back, it's a heavier guitar, but certainly not excessively so, and at a shade under 9lb, it's lighter than many 50s instruments and balances well, whether seated or standing.

The rosewood 'board is a darker and more attractive slab than the Tribute's lighter, purple-

KEY FEATURES

LES PAUL TRIBUTE
PRICE £999 (inc. gigbag)
DESCRIPTION Single cutaway electric guitar. Made in USA
BUILD Mahogany back with 'ultra modern' weight relief, maple top, set maple neck with 12"/304.8mm radius rosewood fingerboard with acrylic trapezoid inlays, 22 medium-jumbo frets, Graph Tech nut
HARDWARE Aluminium Nashville Tune-o-matic bridge, aluminium stop tailpiece, vintage-style machineheads
ELECTRICS 490R (neck) and 490T (bridge) humbuckers, 2x volume, 2x tone, 3-way toggle selector switch
SCALE LENGTH 24.75"/628.6mm
NECK WIDTH 42.8mm at nut, 52.4mm at 12th fret
NECK DEPTH 21.7mm at first fret, 25.1mm at 12th fret
STRING SPACING 35.6mm at nut, 50.8mm at bridge
WEIGHT 3.49kg/7.7lb
FINISH Satin Tobacco Burst nitrocellulose (as reviewed), Satin Iced Tea, Satin Honeyburst, Satin Cherry Sunburst
CONTACT Gibson gibson.com

9/10 **A real-world gigging guitar that's stripped down but wears its heritage on its sleeve**

streaked 'board. The neck is a short-tenon quartersawn mahogany affair, while the revised fingerboard binding – still with a slightly tangerine hue, but slimmed down dramatically for more of a 1950s appearance – means that the nibs are smaller and less intrusive for players with a wide vibrato.

The Standard's figured top impresses at this price point, with the centre-joined flame maple shimmering under lights and much like an old LP, it can look almost plain from some angles and erupt from others.

In order to show off as much of that flame as possible, our review model comes without its pickguard fitted, but it ships with one in the case should you prefer the 'guard on' look. If drilling holes in a pristine new instrument is intimidating, then we'd recommend asking if the scratchplate can be fitted at the point of sale. It's somewhat easier to fit the Tribute model's absent 'poker chip' pickup-selector surround, which also ships in the case.

IN USE

Although both of our review guitars have shipped without their screw-coil polepiece heights being optimised and have slightly sharp edges at the nut, the basics are otherwise all present and correct. The frets have been installed neatly and the ends are nicely rounded on the Tribute's unbound fingerboard, while the thin satin lacquer on the back of the neck provides a very smooth ride.

Every Gibson USA model's frets are levelled and dressed by a Plek machine and even when we test the Plek machine's capabilities with some extreme bends in high registers, there's no choking or fretting out to be found.

The Tribute's rounded C profile is slim but hugely playable and doesn't paint you into any stylistic corners. The maple neck and 'ultra modern' weight relief translate into an airy and enthusiastic performance that's really appealing and although it lacks some of the midrange power of a solid-bodied, mahogany neck Lester, there's plenty of sustain. Many will prefer its breezier sound, especially in an era where cleaner and more textural tones predominate.

The 490R and 490T aren't the pickups most loved by Les Paul aficionados, but the alnico II units certainly sound good in this context. It's simply a well put-together, fuss-free instrument that does exactly what it's supposed to and can cover a lot of ground.

Moving on to the Standard, the out of the box setup is again very good indeed. It's dreamily playable, and unlike many original Bursts and slavish reissues, you don't have to flip the G saddle around to get it to intonate correctly. We love the neck – Gibson has resisted the temptation to go for a huge mid-50s profile and instead, this beautifully rounded carve has a medium-depth more akin to a '59.

Comparing the two neck carves is interesting, because it illustrates that dimensions only tell part of the story. Even though the Tribute fattens out a little more at the 12th fret, it feels sleeker overall, while the '50s model feels fuller because of its more even, gradual taper as you head up to the octave marker.

Does double the price mean double the tone? The reality is it never does, but the Standard's Burstbucker tones do feel a little more complex in the midrange, with more sophistication and depth overall. While it isn't as vintage-authentic as an R9 loaded with unpotted pickups wired 50s-style, there's still more subtlety here than some of the production-line Standards of the last couple of decades.

Neither instrument has too thick or syrupy a neck pickup and there's much more versatility across the board as a result – especially in the often-overlooked middle setting, where experimenting with your controls delivers a wide range of sounds. We've said it before, but try knocking back the neck volume to about 8.5 with the pickup selector in the middle position – it's such an expressive voice for lead work and you don't have to pile on the gain to get plenty of sustain and harmonic content to work with.

Although traditionalists might bristle at the Tribute model's cost-saving specifications, such as weight relief, a 5mm shallower body and PCB-mounted

ABOVE TOP The Tribute's controls are PCB mounted to reduce assembly costs

ABOVE BOTTOM The view inside the control cavity of the Les Paul Standard '50s reveals hand-wiring and Orange Drop capacitors

ABOVE The Les Paul Standard '50s features a breathtaking figured maple top

RIGHT Vintage-style machineheads with keystone buttons adorn the headstocks of both models

KEY FEATURES

LES PAUL STANDARD '50S
PRICE £1,999 (inc. hard case)
DESCRIPTION Solidbody single-cutaway electric guitar. Made in USA
BUILD Solid mahogany back with figured maple top, set mahogany neck with 12"/304.8mm radius rosewood fingerboard with acrylic trapezoid inlays, 22 medium-jumbo frets, Graph Tech nut
HARDWARE Nickel ABR-1 Tune-o-matic bridge, aluminium stop tailpiece, vintage-style machineheads
ELECTRICS Burstbucker 1 (neck), Burstbucker 2 (bridge), 2x volume, 2x tone, Orange Drop tone capacitors, 3-way toggle selector switch
SCALE LENGTH 24.75"/628.6mm
NECK WIDTH 43.3mm at nut, 52.4mm at 12th fret
NECK DEPTH 21.9mm at first fret, 24.6mm at 12th fret
STRING SPACING 35.3mm at nut, 52.4mm at bridge
WEIGHT 4.07kg/8.98lb
FINISH Heritage Cherry Sunburst gloss nitrocellulose (as reviewed), Tobacco Burst, Gold Top

8/10 **With its return to classic specs, this straight-ahead Standard will win friends**

controls, we strongly recommend playing one and making up your own mind – this is a toneful, lightweight Les Paul that's less stressful to throw on for a rehearsal or pub gig than its more luxurious sibling.

Both guitars have bridge pickups that are a touch brash when you really dig in and there's definitely room for further improvement. However, on balance, there's an appealing simplicity here which, if not quite a full-scale revolution, feels like a step in the right direction for Gibson – especially when you consider that the pricing is now more competitive, too.

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

Eastman SB59 Plain Top **£1,599**, Maybach Lester 59 Aged **£1,721**, PRS S2 Singlecut Standard Satin **£999**

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THE GUITAR INTERVIEW

GUTHRIE GOVAN

The title of 'best guitarist on the planet' is a contentious and subjective one, but whatever your inclinations, the chances are that Guthrie Govan's name will come up in the discussion. For over 20 years, the Essex-born musical polymath has been wowing audiences with his mind-bending technique, feel and command of the instrument that seems to fit in any genre he chooses to step into. For now, however, the 47-year-old returns with his band, The Aristocrats, who have stormed back with their first new album in four years. We chat to Guthrie about upping his aggression, playing well with others, and why guitar solos aren't integral…

WORDS DARRAN CHARLES **PHOTOGRAPHY** JON R LUINI, CHIME INTERACTIVE

When Guthrie Govan and his cohorts Marco Minneman and Bryan Beller released *Tres Caballeros* back in 2015 – The Aristocrats' third full-length in four years – it wasn't unreasonable to expect the band would more or less follow the two-year album/tour cycle that's become almost standard in the music industry.

But Guthrie has never been one to do what's expected and the four-year gap since that album – with him spending a great portion of those years working with composer Hans Zimmer and contributing to movie scores for such films as *The Boss Baby* – led many to ponder if we might ever see another release from the rock-fusion supergroup.

Thankfully, on 28 June 2019, the answer to that question was served up in the form of *You Know What…?* – a customarily quirky title for the band's fourth studio album.

We caught up with Guthrie just as The Aristocrats were commencing the first leg of their North American tour to find out why there had been such a long break between albums, and if a new solo record will ever see the light of day…

"I'VE ALWAYS LIKED THE IDEA OF A BITING PICK ATTACK WHEN USING AN OVERDRIVEN TONE – I SUSPECT IT COMES FROM LISTENING TO A LOT OF ZAL CLEMINSON"

Did you plan to have such an extended hiatus between this album and the last?
"Not really… it just transpired that each of us had other commitments during that period, so it took a little while for everyone's calendars to align again!"

As you would expect from The Aristocrats, there's plenty of playfulness, but predominantly there's a darker, more exotic feel to the album. Is that something you noticed?
"That wasn't a planned thing at all – each of us writes our three songs without necessarily knowing what the other two might have in the works. But of course, we did all notice that slight mood shift at some point. In fact, I remember talking to Bryan about the slightly darker vibe of the new album and somewhat fancifully, we concluded that perhaps it was just time for the band to make our version of Van Halen's *Fair Warning* – also a fourth album and similarly characterised by an atypically brooding seriousness!

"Having said that, I think the sheer over-the-top silliness of *When We All Come Together* alone manages to balance everything out nicely!"

There's a more aggressive edge to the album at certain points, too – particularly on *Terrible Lizard*. Did the song's subject inspire a certain ferocity?
"Possibly – though in my mind, the eponymous dinosaur wasn't necessarily doing anything threatening! Mainly, I pictured it just lumbering around and being ridiculously large, so I guess the song's primary objective was to evoke thunderous footsteps rather than any specific act of ferocity.

"In general, I've always liked the idea of a biting pick attack when using an overdriven guitar tone; I suspect that probably comes from listening to a lot of Zal Cleminson from The Sensational Alex Harvey Band when I was much younger. Also, the new voicing of the MKII version of the Victory V30 amp probably helped me to articulate a little more of that vibe. Perhaps that contributed something extra to the *Terrible Lizard* guitar sound?"

In *Spanish Eddie* there's a wonderfully spanking-clean guitar tone. Was that your Strat with the stock noiseless pickups?
"Ah, the very same mystery section! That was actually the neck humbucker on my ash-bodied GG signature Charvel, running into an AC30, of all things. When we started to run through the tune in the studio, that section started out as a more Zappa-esque jam where I was using an overdriven tone and an envelope filter, but then I came to realise that the song needed something more mellow at that point, to enhance the 'surprise factor' of the following section."

There are also some crushingly heavy tones on the album. Did you experiment in the studio to find the right balance?
"I did indeed experiment – the place where we recorded had a fine collection of interesting vintage guitars, amps and effects. Given that the studio owners actively encouraged us to try stuff out, I felt that it would have been rude not to do so!

"In terms of unexpected amp choices, I used the aforementioned AC30 for the clean sounds in *Spanish Eddie* and *Last Orders*, and I seem to recall that we tracked *All Said And Done* with a small Carr combo – I'm ashamed to admit that I've forgotten the model name – as we were intentionally looking for a more 'retro' tone on that track.

"Guitar-wise, I used a nice 60s Jazzmaster for *Spiritus Cactus* and a 70s Les Paul for *The Ballad Of Bonnie And Clyde*. The Les Paul was actually the property of Kenny Loggins, as it turned out: it was set up with ultra-light gauge strings and preposterously low action so I definitely struggled to keep it in tune. Nonetheless, I really wanted to channel more of a

'70s rock' vibe on that track, so I persevered! The heavily overdubbed *When We All Come Together* features all kinds of bizarre instruments, including a baritone guitar and electric mandola made by Duesenberg, plus an ancient 'junk shop' archtop acoustic with no visible brand name.

"But the 'lead' guitar you hear on that track was a Bilt Corvaire – one of the strangest-looking instruments in the studio's collection. It has certain surf-style, Jazzmaster-esque characteristics, but then, inexplicably, it also featured see-through f-holes which ran all the way through the body. It looked disconcertingly odd, but it sounded amazing – it had plenty of the desired 'twang' without sounding thin.

"Having said all of that, my main setup for the bulk of the album was still my Charvel signature guitar (the ash-bodied version) running into a Victory V30 MKII head and a 2x12 cabinet with Celestion Vintage 30 speakers. The main effects I can remember using were an Xotic wah, an Xotic EP Booster, a Providence chorus, a Uni-Vibe that I borrowed from the studio and the Synthonizer algorithm from an Eventide H9 (mainly for the weird noises on *Burial At Sea*)."

Given that you rarely replicate studio solos live, is it safe to say you don't view those studio solos as necessarily integral to the song?
"Short answer: yes! Certain solos in the rock-guitar canon have obviously attained absolute 'scripture' status and can never be changed, as they were clearly *composed* and truly serve a 'song within the song' purpose – I'm pretty sure that nobody wants to hear a 'new and improved' solo in *Hotel California* or *Bohemian Rhapsody*!

"For the kind of thing I tend to do, however, my instincts normally pull me towards more of a jazz mindset. I find it reassuring to think of reference points such as the mighty Jeff Beck, who of course would never dream of playing the same solo from one night to the next.

"Whenever I write something for The Aristocrats, I typically try to incorporate both extremes so there will be certain parts where every event is very composed/defined and then there will be other contrasting sections where we can tap into our more loose, improvisational side: these sections can then reflect however we might all be feeling on any given night. I think improvisation is probably the area where I feel the most comfortable and presumably have the most to offer. I also like the general concept of allowing a song to grow when you take it out on tour, rather than trying to crystallise the perfect version of the solo and then having to replicate that every night.

"Taking risks can occasionally be very fruitful, because you tend to remember the things which worked particularly well and in some cases, those ideas gradually become assimilated into your general vocabulary. A present-day live version of an older song like *Furtive Jack* will feature quite a few elements which started out as cheeky experiments during one particular gig, but then gradually came to be accepted as permanent parts of the arrangement. And all of this happened without any kind of formal discussion: it almost felt like the song was telling us how it wanted to be arranged, and all we had to do was pay attention."

Touring with artists such as Steven Wilson, your pedalboards have been quite elaborate, but you seem to strip things back for your own music…
"Some of that approach may well stem from my formative years, when all I had was a guitar and an amp; I grew up in an environment where there really wasn't any budget for acquiring and experimenting with a variety of pedals, so I suppose I was compelled to explore more affordable means of varying my tone, by experimenting with different kinds of pick attack and such like. To this day, my natural instinct each time I play a note is to be very aware of every little detail – timbrally, dynamically, et cetera – so part of me probably wants to ensure that the listener can really *hear* all those details, some of which might well get lost if I enhanced them with too much soft-focus processing. One additional factor is so many venues present acoustic challenges: in a bad-sounding room, the best way to ensure the maximum transmission of nuance and detail to the listeners is to adopt an unforgivingly dry tone on the stage…"

"TO THIS DAY, MY NATURAL INSTINCT EACH TIME I PLAY A NOTE IS TO BE VERY AWARE OF EVERY LITTLE DETAIL – TIMBRALLY, DYNAMICALLY, ET CETERA"

Even though you're self-taught, what was the most memorable advice you were given when learning?
"Way back when I was still learning my first few open chord shapes, my dad somehow managed to explain the nebulous concept of playing music 'with feeling' in a way which actually made sense to me: this concept helped me to understand how it was possible I could, at least occasionally, play an Elvis song with 100 per cent accuracy and yet still sound nothing like the original recording I was trying to emulate. To this day, that general concept of 'playing like you mean it'

ABOVE The Aristocrats (Guthrie, Bryan Beller and Marco Minneman) pose for a group photo with legendary drummer Simon Phillips

might well be the single most important thing that anyone else ever taught me."

Anyone who has tried to become virtuosic knows there are psychological barriers to overcome to be able to nail it when it matters. Did you have to overcome those sorts of hurdles?
"I suppose the trick is probably to incorporate the right kind of mindset into your practice routine and to work on being able to play things effortlessly while feeling relatively relaxed. This is very different from knowing that you're capable of doing something, but only if you try extra-hard and apply your maximum level of concentration: in a real gig environment, there will always be a million other distractions, so it's good to have a little 'headroom'."

Do you have plans to update your Charvel signature?
"Honestly, I've pretty much run out of things to request or complain about! Then again, I was absolutely sure that we were done way back when the first version of that guitar came out and then, gradually, a few little additional ideas for the 'Mark 2' version started to emerge so... who knows? Now, though, I really feel like I have the ideal instrument in terms of being able to cope with all of the different musical situations I might encounter."

Can you see another solo album happening, or are your creative and compositional ambitions best served up in the context of The Aristocrats?
"I can certainly envisage one happening sooner or later, but it's really not my top priority… if and when it does happen, it's unlikely to bear a great deal of resemblance to its predecessor. *Erotic Cakes* was a shamelessly guitar-centric offering, whereas these days, for the most part, I'm really more interested in music as a whole, as opposed to focusing on guitar per se. One thing I particularly enjoy about working in an Aristocratic context is I get to function as part of a whole band where everyone's contribution is of equal importance. I'm also really enjoying my involvement with Hans Zimmer's world – both the live shows and the occasional new movie score – as that provides an opportunity to explore how guitar might fit within contexts where it wouldn't usually be expected to make an appearance!" G

The Aristocrats' new album, *You Know What...?* is out now. Read more from our interview with Guthrie on *Guitar.com*

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ERNIE BALL

From poverty and homelessness to destructive band environments and a very real brush with death, Yola had quite a journey on the way to the Nashville studio where she created her debut album with Dan Auerbach. We sit down with the Bristol-based singer and guitarist and find out why the guitar became a powerful symbol of creative independence that helped her shape her own destiny…

WORDS JOSH GARDNER **PHOTOGRAPHY** ELEANOR JANE

FIRE WALK WITH ME

"Birth! The birth canal motivated me to start singing!" Yola – aka Yolanda Quartey – is a one-off, as her answer to the question 'What first inspired you to make music?' shows. It's accompanied by a booming, staccato laugh that will frequently pepper our hour-long chat in her rehearsal space in a quiet cul-de-sac just north of Bristol.

The laugh is a constant, even when the 35-year-old is getting into some of the dark places in which she's found herself. But it never feels forced – she comes across as someone who laughs now because she's genuinely grateful and delighted to be out of the other side. And not just out of it, but thriving – creatively fulfilled for the first time ever, having just made her debut album with Dan Auerbach.

But anyway, back to the birth canal… "I came into the planet and the second I could form any coherence of sound, singing seemed as obvious as talking," Yola elaborates. "It's like asking, how long have you been eating? How long have you been breathing?"

TAKING RISKS

Yola's voice is one that you might well have heard without even realising it – her pipes have been featured on pop hits by Katy Perry and Will Young, and EDM chart-toppers from Chase & Status and Duke Dumont… but that's never been the music that she wanted to make.

"From about age four it dawned on me that I was weird! I was like, 'Have you heard this song *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road*?'" Yola recalls. "'Oh man, the chords, and the way they move…' And everyone was like, 'Wuh?!'"

Yola grew up just outside of Bristol in Portishead. Her Ghanaian father left before she was two and her mum – a psychiatric nurse who'd come over from Barbados in the 1970s – was left to keep things together as best she could, which didn't involve encouraging her daughter's dreams of being a musician… "She did everything within her power to ruin my music career!" Yola exclaims. "We definitely had this classic single-parent family situation where you're just trying to keep above water. We were always on the breadline and sometimes when it was bad, she'd go to the supermarket bins and get out-of-date stuff. And so I can understand her point of view of, 'Why are you taking a risk?'"

Despite her circumstances, Yola ended up attending a relatively good school ("I like to say that I thought my way into a grammar school, I definitely didn't pay my way!") and it was here that she was first exposed to the freedom that privilege afforded her peers.

"I was acutely aware that we weren't like those people," she recalls. "I couldn't do a classics degree and then go, 'I wonder what I'm going to do with my

ABOVE Yola's Fender Paramount PM-4CE Auditorium acoustic perfectly suits her rhythmic playing style

life?' It was like, 'You better have a plan! You have a plan yesterday!'

"But if I'd had that kind environment where my friends and family were like, 'You go do your dream!', that's really all I would have needed. You don't need to be rich… though obviously, being rich gets you there quicker – that's why the music industry looks like ruddy Eton!"

STREET SPIRIT

Yola initially headed to London for university, though it wasn't her priority. She ended up using her student loan to keep her afloat while she tried to get work as a professional musician, but at the age of 21, circumstances collided in a most serious way.

"I became a university drop-out, because I'd spent so much time looking for work and then I found myself on the sharp end of an eviction," she recalls. "I couldn't pay the rent, because someone that I was living with had to leave as well. They got sick and so they had to go home, and I was like, 'I'm really sorry for what you're going through… but also, I'm now screwed!"

Yola hoped the the friends she'd made through music would come to her aid, but not for the last time, she was let down. "They were like, 'Sorry, babes…' And I'm like, 'But you've known me since I was 15!?' 'Yeah, sorry babes, it's not convenient,'" she recalls, the anger still understandably bubbling up. "And so I found myself on the streets for a short amount of time."

While she wasn't sleeping rough for long, Yola was homeless for the best part of six months, storing her stuff at friends' houses, while sleeping on their couches and old discarded mattresses back in Bristol.

"When you're in your 20s, your back doesn't give a fuck, so it's fine!" she says sardonically. "Homelessness is weird, because you constantly have that sense of burden, you know? You feel like you owe people so much. And it's really hard to ask people for support when you know they kind of don't give a crap."

Despite the unbelievably tough personal situation, professionally, things were starting to happen, and Yola's unique voice was being noticed by producers in the pop and EDM worlds. Around the same time, she also began fronting Phantom Limb, which initially seemed as though it would be a setup in which Yola could be creatively fulfilled.

"I was quite thankful for those session jobs, but I was very aware that they were jobs and it wasn't really me being me," she admits. "Around that time, the band started up, and I thought maybe I could put some of my kind of energy into this…"

OUT ON A LIMB

On paper, Phantom Limb's country-soul crossover sound seemed like the ideal fit for a singer who idolised Elton, Shania Twain, Dolly Parton and CSN as a child. But the longer she was in it, the more she realised that it wasn't a healthy situation…

"It was maybe a bit too 'bro' an environment for me to truly permeate and self-actualise," she explains. "Having people 10 years my senior, some of which had known me since I was 15 years old and who had a lot of control over my view of the world… it was always going to be impossible to exert your 'self'."

The negativity that came to define Yola's life in the band was typified by her bandmates' attitude when she first picked up a guitar around 2010.

"I was in an environment that was really threatened by the concept of me both having the top line and the chords!" she exclaims. "It was just like, 'Uh, no, we don't like this, because then what do we do?' Which wasn't remotely healthy at all."

Conversely, she was getting plenty of session and writing work in the EDM scene, where she was being encouraged to express herself creatively, but it just didn't inspire her.

"I got to the point where it was like, I can either work with great people in the music I don't want to do, or with awful people in the music I *do* want to do," she reflects. "And so I leave the band and then all of a sudden, the oppressive weight is off and I feel

like I can write. And I can do all this stuff! And so I have like one song I write that charts in the Top 10. And then all the blinkers disappear and I think, 'I can do what I bloody like!'

"I was just reprogramming my brain… It dawned on me that I had to learn to lead – and I'd never led anything before. And so that was the big transition, really – going from being chosen to doing the choosing."

GET YOUR PRIVILEGE

The tipping point came when Yola contributed an (uncredited) vocal line for the song *Won't Look Back* for DJ and producer Duke Dumont – the song had huge success in the charts on both sides of the Atlantic and gave her a level of financial security she could only have dreamed of a few years hence.

"On the PPL alone, I was golden!" she laughs. "So I was like, 'Do I buy a house or something, or get a mortgage?' Or… I could just throw it all at building a career, like all the frickin' middle-class rich kids get to do because they've got all this time and all this frickin' bankroll…

"So I was like, 'I'm going to buy my own privilege!' And that's kind of how I got to starting out solo.

"IT WAS LIKE, I CAN EITHER WORK WITH GREAT PEOPLE IN THE MUSIC I DON'T WANT TO DO, OR WITH AWFUL PEOPLE IN THE MUSIC I DO WANT TO DO"

It was me using the model of privilege and then pretending to be my own rich daddy!"

A key part of this next phase in Yola's career was going back to the instrument that she'd been discouraged from experimenting with in the past and using it to start to carve out her own identity as a solo artist.

"I just picked guitar up as a means to an end, because I didn't really have anyone to collaborate with," she explains. "I had songs in my head fully fledged and so I had to try and find a way to get them out. Because that's the thing, you can always hear chords in your head. You can always hear progressions. But when you look down at your hands, you're like, 'But what can you do, though!?'

"Picking up a guitar was just this way of getting songs out of my head. And then it dawned on me that once you get over your hand feeling like a crab claw and it starts feeling like a hand again, the hump

isn't really that massive. And that just made me think, 'Well, what was all the fuss about?!'

As primarily an acoustic player, Yola also had to find the right instrument that would be workable, settling first on a Washburn parlour guitar. "There's some guitars that really make you feel like you're never going to play guitar!" she quips. "So I made sure that I had something with a friendly neck and also something that could fit underneath my rack!"

Now her go-to instrument is a Fender Paramount acoustic, which suits her kinetic style of guitar playing down to the ground.

"I hit the guitar pretty frickin' hard, because I'm quite a rhythmic player," Yola observes. "But with the Paramount, because of the nature of the pickups they're using, I can hit it without getting a boatload of feedback. And it's got a really great neck, so if you grab your F – I'm a grabber, not a barre-er – then it works. It just works for my kind of playing."

THE SPICE OF LIFE

Yola's tastes in music have always been broad – "my playlists were a hot mess," she chuckles – bringing in everything from R&B and hip-hop to grunge and Britpop, with dollops of classic Americana and country thrown in for good measure. "I was like, 'Is there a world where all of this stuff lives together?' In my dream world, all of it would smoosh under one loving blanket orgy of musical good times! And it dawned on me that being that eclectic as a kid was weird."

As she got older, artists like Beck, Björk and Radiohead started bringing more esoteric music into the mainstream consciousness, but she still found that as a young black woman with a soulful voice, she was getting pigeonholed in a way that made her uncomfortable.

"I've always been trying to follow what feels like my path, as opposed to kind of trying to contrive or contort what I'm doing too much. It's not like I haven't done that, it's just that I recognise that isn't me.

"And that's very hard to explain to people who hang around in environments where that's all that black people do. But I'm more complicated! I had eclectic records like everyone else did. I did have things like hip-hop and R&B in my childhood… but my voice don't sound like that! And so the only thing I could do was follow my voice, and see what it wanted to do."

DAN'S THE MAN

Where her voice wanted to go, was Nashville. Soon after deciding to focus on her solo material, Yola got involved with the UK side of the Americana Music Association and through them, earned the chance to go with some other UK-based artists to the home of country music and play showcases for some of the movers and shakers in town.

On her second pass through the city, word of Yola's unique talent reached the ears of Dan Auerbach; the Black Keys main man knew he'd found the perfect addition to his Easy Eye Sound label.

"I had got his 2016 record and I was just listening to it thinking, 'This sounds great… wouldn't it be really awesome to work with him," she recalls of the moment she got Auerbach's call. "And then all of a sudden, 'Bring, bring!' And I'm like, 'Come on, buddy, this is a bit on the nose, innit?!'"

Yola soon made her way to Nashville, and began to write with Auerbach on what would become her debut solo album. "At first it was just terrifying! Because everything that's around you [in his studio] is just ridiculous. Just ridiculous levels of awesome. And so you're just trying to not drink in and focus. But I knew that I just had to find that musical crossover. And how we got going was very much, 'Okay, what are you into?' And as much 'What you *not* into?' We definitely bonded over our loathing of 80s aesthetic!

"We probably wrote about 30 tunes in about five days – we wrote a lot! So it didn't take long to get to the point – when you're in the right environment, it's like everything's in slow motion, like you're Neo or some shit!"

Those songs were pared down into *Walk Through Fire*, a 12-track slice of sublimely vibey and authentic-sounding soul-tinged country and Americana, recorded by Yola, Auerbach and a murderers' row of Nashville session musicians.

The one track that she's particularly proud of, however, is the one that didn't have her multi-Platinum-selling co-writer in the room – *It Ain't Easier*. "I just worked up demos of songs that I had and with that one I said to him, 'Well, here it is,' and he's like, 'Yeah, that's pretty much it!'

"Obviously, a lot more money has gone into it! But it was very interesting having the songs that we've written and the ones that have just flowed out of my brain and to just go, 'Yeah, they sit perfectly happily together.'"

FIRE PROOF

The album's title might seem like a classic songwriter's metaphor for overcoming the hard times that led her to the happiness and success that she's now found, but in truth, there's a much more visceral and remarkable story behind *Walk Through Fire*. Not long after she began embarking on her solo career, the kitchen of Yola's house caught fire, when she was inside… "I was in shock, because I was on fire – and the thing that snapped me out of shock was thinking about the life that I'd been in previously and going, 'Oh, that was way worse…'" she says, matter-of-factly. "And I started laughing, because your first instinct is to laugh.

"And whilst burning, it dawned on me that I'd take the life that I was building – I hadn't even finished building it, but it was kind of taking shape and I was starting to see everything that could happen. I had some people to write with, I was starting to pick up the guitar and I could hold down a chord progression without my hand crumbling to a pile of dust. And I was like, 'This is the beginning of something. This has potential. I feel hope for the first time in years.'

"And so I started to feel this sense of hope. It dawned on me that I'm still on fire, but I said, 'I'll take this now, on fire, over that life, not being on fire. It was way worse than fire. I'd happily set myself on fire right now. If the choice was that, or go back to that old life. I'm like, 'Where's the lighter?'"

Yola's debut album *Walk Through Fire* is out now on Easy Eye Sound/Nonesuch

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THE SECRET LIFE OF JOSÉ GONZÁLEZ

From playing in hardcore bands to spinning covers of electronic tracks to touring with a 22-piece orchestra, José González is a balladeer whose pensive acoustic songs belie his constant craving for change. He's also a sometimes-DJ, a dancehall enthusiast, producer and, in one strand of his multi-threaded life, a PhD candidate in biochemistry. We chat with the singer-songwriter and get him to spill the beans…

WORDS DANIEL ONG **PHOTOGRAPHY** MALIN JOHANSSON

José González slinks into our interview with furtive steps and stolen glances. He greets us in hushed tones, carefully choosing his words, as though aware that he shouldn't betray the autumnal indie-folk persona he's grown to inhabit over the course of his career.

Three solo studio albums, each a study in late-night introspection, have earned him that reputation. But this isn't a performance. Secrecy is, in person and song, his medium.

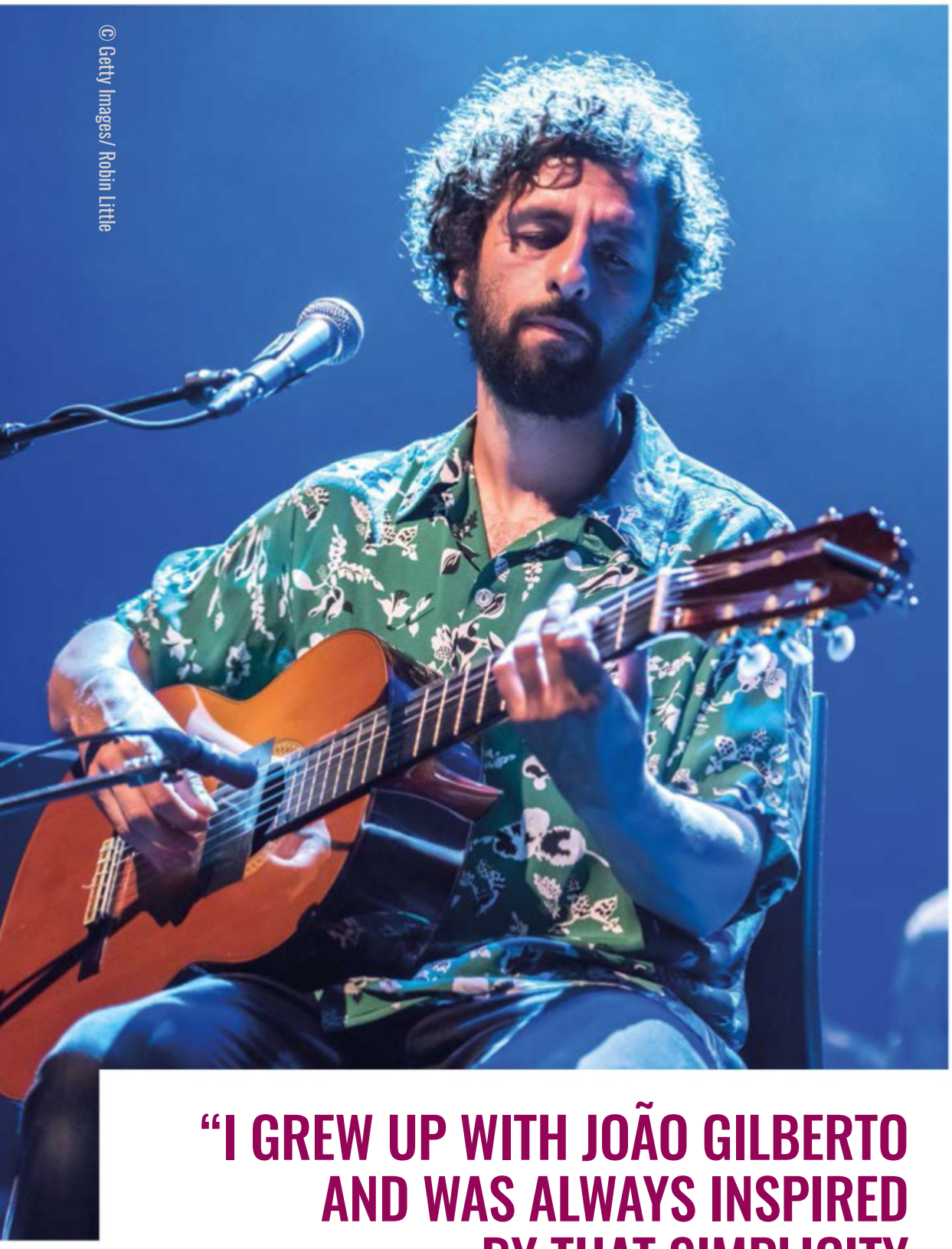
The singer-songwriter, born to Argentine immigrant parents in Sweden, is an enigma waiting to be solved. He isn't a technical virtuoso in the traditional sense, but his nylon-string fingerwork is unassumingly deft and agile. He's often pigeonholed with Bon Iver and Iron & Wine, yet the depth of his influences extends far beyond rock, indie and Americana. He had embarked on a PhD in biochemistry, yet his music is more at home in a library than a laboratory.

The 2013 film *The Secret Life Of Walter Mitty*, which his tunes soundtrack, is an apt analogy for González's sound: bittersweet, life-affirming and painfully romantic all at once.

"When I listen to music while running or even DJ'ing, I enjoy music from Africa and Nigeria," the 40-year-old reveals. "I like everything that's dancehall or dancehall-ish. That's always an inspiration. But I think I incorporate [those styles] without thinking about it, when I'm trying to find new rhythms, new arpeggios. So I have, I guess, parallel lives."

THE SWEDE LIFE

González grew up in a suburb of Gothenburg, an area he describes as a "music city by the ocean". Growing up, his tastes were informed by his father, whose love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"I GREW UP WITH JOÃO GILBERTO AND WAS ALWAYS INSPIRED BY THAT SIMPLICITY AND THAT STYLE OF SINGING, WHICH WAS ALWAYS CALM"

of Tropicália and bossa nova – in particular Mercedes Sosa, João Gilberto, Silvio Rodríguez and Caetano Veloso – formed the bedrock of his guitar style.

"My father used to sing in an Argentinian folk band. So basically, harmonies and bomba drums, two or three guitars. That sound is something that I think I assimilated. My father and his band would sing The Beatles and bossa nova. I grew up with João Gilberto and was always inspired by that simplicity and that style of singing, which was always calm. Similar to Chet Baker, singers who don't really shout – very soft and close to the mic," he recalls.

But it didn't begin that way. In the 90s, González played in hardcore bands before forming the indie-rock trio Junip with two childhood friends. Only in the University Of Gothenburg, with the pressure of pursuing a life in academia, did he come full circle to the sounds of Latin America. "With each year, I had less and less interest with my hardcore band and I started studying at university and I felt that I didn't have enough time to spend on this hobby," he says. "We did the recordings, but not that much happened. But with my solo music, it was different. I kept on recording once in a while, usually on cassettes and also on a 7" I put out on my friend's label. That 7" got picked up by a label in Stockholm and that was when I switched from biochemistry to music full-time."

2003 was the year he endeared himself to the *Pitchfork* crowd. He released *Veneer*, an album cherished as much for its quietude as its spine-tingling cover of *Heartbeats*, an electro-pop song by out-there Swedish band The Knife. He was the soft-spoken answer to the eccentric Devendra Banhart: an acoustic guitarist dressed in corduroy and brown instead of Banhart's glitter and gold.

"It was fun to make a cover while [The Knife's] version was still on the radio, on TV," González explains of his decision to take on songs from bands that sound wildly different from his own. Trip-hop group Massive Attack's *Teardrop* is another electronic track he has reworked. "I was inspired by how in Jamaica, if you have a hit, then everybody does it and you have five versions going on at the same time. So in that spirit, I felt it was fun to cover their version. Since it was different, I was also inspired by Johnny Cash and his albums, just taking different popular songs and making them your own."

ON THE SILVER SCREEN

Veneer found a second wind a few years after its release, when songs from the album were used in teen soaps – *Crosses* featured on *The* OC and *Heartbeats* on *One Tree Hill*. González followed up with the intimate albums *In Our Nature* and *Vestiges & Claws*, but a years-long touring partnership with The String Theory brought out a more cinematic approach.

"The String Theory is an orchestra/collective based in Berlin and Gothenburg," he explains. "They invited me as one of many artists to do one song each with them in Gothenburg in 2008, I think. And I liked it so much, I invited them to do a full show a couple of years later. Then, we started touring together as a 22-piece orchestra around Europe and the States. It's a very eclectic but very talented collective. They did arrangements for all my songs; some are very classic and harmonic, some are more experimental."

Fast-forward to 2013, and González made his silver-screen soundtrack debut with a collection of grander tunes for *The Secret Life Of Walter Mitty*.

"It was the first time I worked on a film that big. I'd done a TV series in Sweden, but when I started working on the film, it felt like a big thing for me," he says. "So I was like, I can't say no to this and said yes, even though I felt like I didn't have the time. It was very nice to collaborate with Ben Stiller and [film composer] Teddy Shapiro, who's done so many films and comedies."

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> "I LEARNT A LOT WITH THE STRING THEORY, WHEN YOU HAVE TO LISTEN TO THE WHOLE ORCHESTRA AND SEE HOW TO TAKE A MORE PRODUCER ROLE"

The experience taught González "how to set moods with chord progressions and also how to get comfortable in studios where you produce a lot". "I learnt a lot and I also used it a bit when I was working with The String Theory, when you have to listen to the whole orchestra and see how to take a more producer role."

In February this year, the collaboration spawned *Live In Europe*, a two-LP live compilation. "The easiest way was to record our live shows, because it's such a big production, we didn't feel like we had the time and money to go into the studio. And so we just recorded each show on that tour in Europe and picked out [our] favourite songs."

When our conversation shifts to gear, the previously reserved González becomes much more animated. A lynchpin of his stage sound are warm, round, almost vocal-like Spanish guitars: he favours Esteve, Alhambra and Córdoba instruments and the Fishman Prefix Pro Blend pickup system. "I've used these pickups for 15 years now," he explains. "And we just found a way to make it sound loud and still natural, compared to many other piezo mic and blenders. The guitar is important, but more important is the pickup and the sound engineers. I always have two sound engineers that I work with."

Besides those, González's tone is influenced by something far more prosaic: duct tape. The soundholes on his guitars are almost completely taped over, which he says is a way to reduce feedback. "It's pretty simple: you want to avoid feedback," he explains. "You can buy round things to cover the hole, but then to me, it sounds a bit too nasally, so we started out trying half a hole, but two-thirds seems to be the sweet spot. It changes the sound a bit for the worse, but it's definitely helpful for big stages, especially festivals.

"Getting a loud, natural and clear sound is always hard. But the hardest part, one step before that, is to explain to the PA guys that you need more speakers when you just have a nylon-string guitar. They usually think that it's only guitar and vocals, so you'll be fine with these two speakers. But since it's so sensitive, you need to bring up the volume a lot, and with that, you get more feedback."

HARD AS NAILS

As an acoustic player, González has a valuable tip to share. "I've become very aware of my nails," he says. "I use nail strengthener, and there's also a protein gel that you can apply that's really helpful. I even bought an acrylic kit for a couple of tours and did my own acrylic nails." Even the techniques he uses aren't off-limits for discussion. You'd imagine the troubadour to rely predominantly on melancholic chords – but not quite. "Major-*ish*," he laughs when prodded about whether he prefers minor or major chords. "It's been something I've thought about a lot, that I didn't want to make minor-chord songs. So I chose not to add the third too often, but when I do, it's in that middle ground. Many people resonate with the music because it's moody, but if they analyse it, it's not so often that I use a minor."

The music of his heroes Caetano Veloso, Silvio Rodríguez and Gilberto Gil springs to mind when thinking of "major-ish" chords underlined by sorrow. But González is quick to dismiss suggestions that his heritage had anything to do with it. "With South America – I think about it a lot in terms of culture and nationality, where humanity is headed," he explains. "I feel nationality has its nice things, but people are taking it way too seriously. The flags, the languages of each culture. They forget about how connected we are."

***Live In Europe* by José González And The String Theory is out now on Pledge Music**

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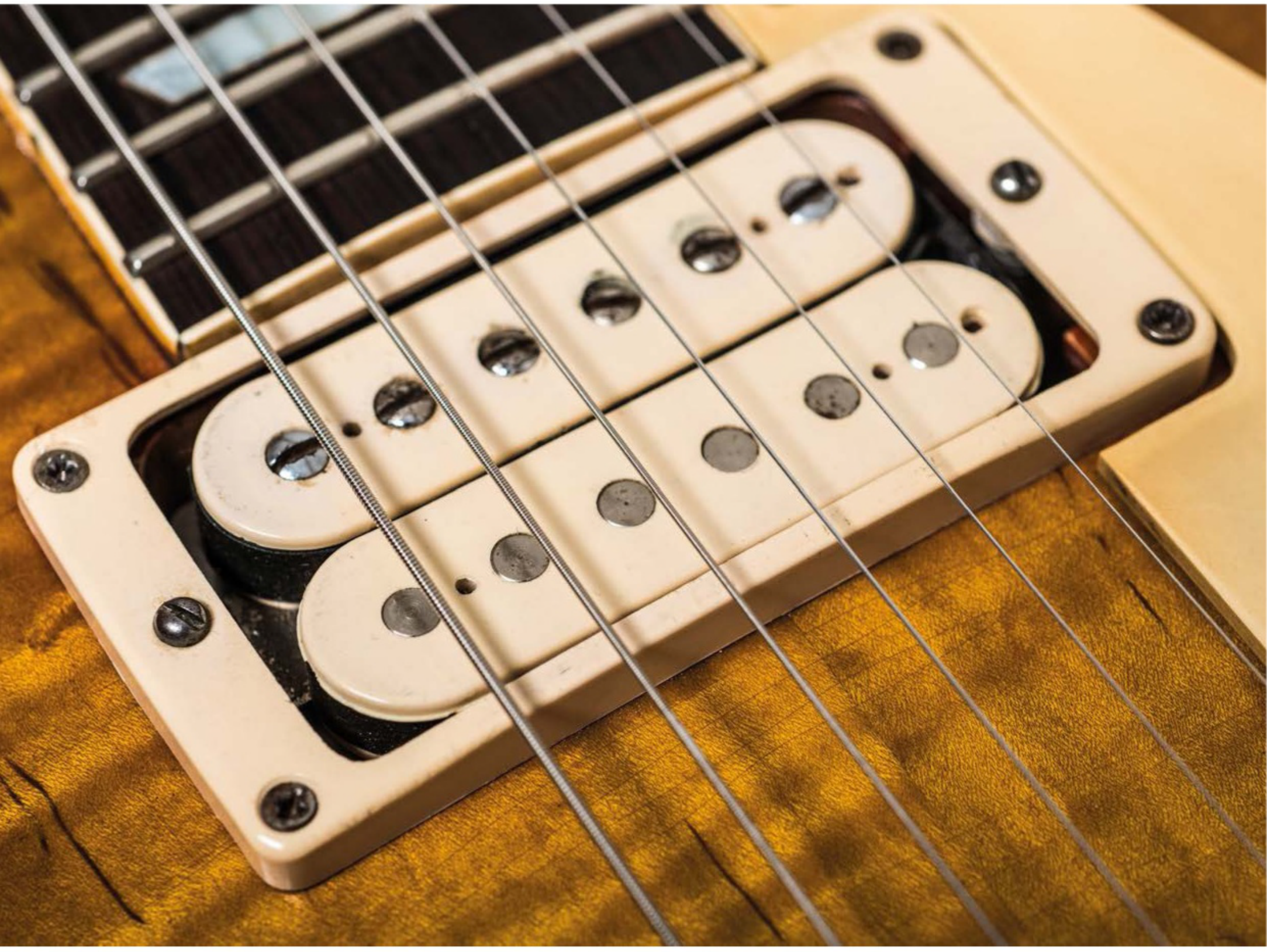
TREBLE

VINTAGE BENCH TEST

WILD AS THE WESTERN WIND

With its spectacular faded flametop and double-cream pickups, this 1959 Les Paul is a fire-breathing rock monster with a storied past. Meet the Richrath Burst…

WORDS HUW PRICE **PHOTOGRAPHY** ELEANOR JANE

ABOVE A flamey top with rare double-white humbuckers make this a very desirable vintage Burst

OPPOSITE LEFT TOP Despite this being the original bridge, there's none of the noticeable sagging that afflicts some vintage units

OPPOSITE LEFT MIDDLE All four knobs are in great shape, with no damage and very little playwear

OPPOSITE RIGHT The original colour survives under the pickguard to provide a tantalising glimpse into how the guitar looked when new

OPPOSITE BOTTOM Even by the standards of 1959 Les Pauls, this is a particularly figured example

In the world of vintage-guitar collecting, provenance is of huge importance. And when it comes to vintage Les Pauls, the stakes are very high indeed. Happily, this is one '59 that comes with its history well documented and a former celebrity owner.

Currently for sale via Lucky Fret Music Co in London's Shoreditch neighbourhood, the Richrath Burst (serial number 9 0614) is named after its former owner, REO Speedwagon's Gary Richrath.

Richrath – REO Speedwagon's lead guitarist, songwriter and occasional singer between 1970 and 1989 – was a Burst collector. Although there are no known photographs of him playing this guitar, it was acquired by well-known guitar dealer Jacques Mazzoleni in around 1989. The instrument had been in the possession of Richrath's ex-girlfriend and Mazzoleni's partner was a friend.

From there, it went to another vintage dealer, Richie Friedman, and then to noted collector Kosta Kovachev. The Richrath was traded to yet another dealer, Gil Southworth, before returning to Mazzoleni in 1998.

It wasn't long before the Richrath Burst made its way to its current owner, who has been in possession of the instrument for 21 years. The guitar also appears in several of Vic DaPra's books beloved of Les Paul enthusiasts including *Burst Believers II* and *III*. In 2018, it was played on stage at Cardiff's Motorpoint Arena by Joe Bonamassa.

DEEP DIVE

Although the guitar is largely original, close inspection reveals there are a few issues to consider. Although Klusons are the only machineheads ever to have been fitted, one of the tuners doesn't match the others and removing the replacement unit reveals a 'PAT APPLD' stamp on the underside, meaning that it was manufactured between 1953 and 1956.

Photographs from 1994 show the Richrath Burst with covered pickups. Although the current, uncovered set comprises a pair of genuine PAFs, they aren't original to the guitar.

Swapped pickups might be a concern to some, but the fact that they are highly sought-after units with white bobbins may mitigate this somewhat, along with the pair of original covers stashed inside the Lifton case.

Besides the pickup connections on the volume pots, all other solder joints appear untouched. The

pots are original, and the 'bumblebee' capacitors are the earlier paper-in-oil types.

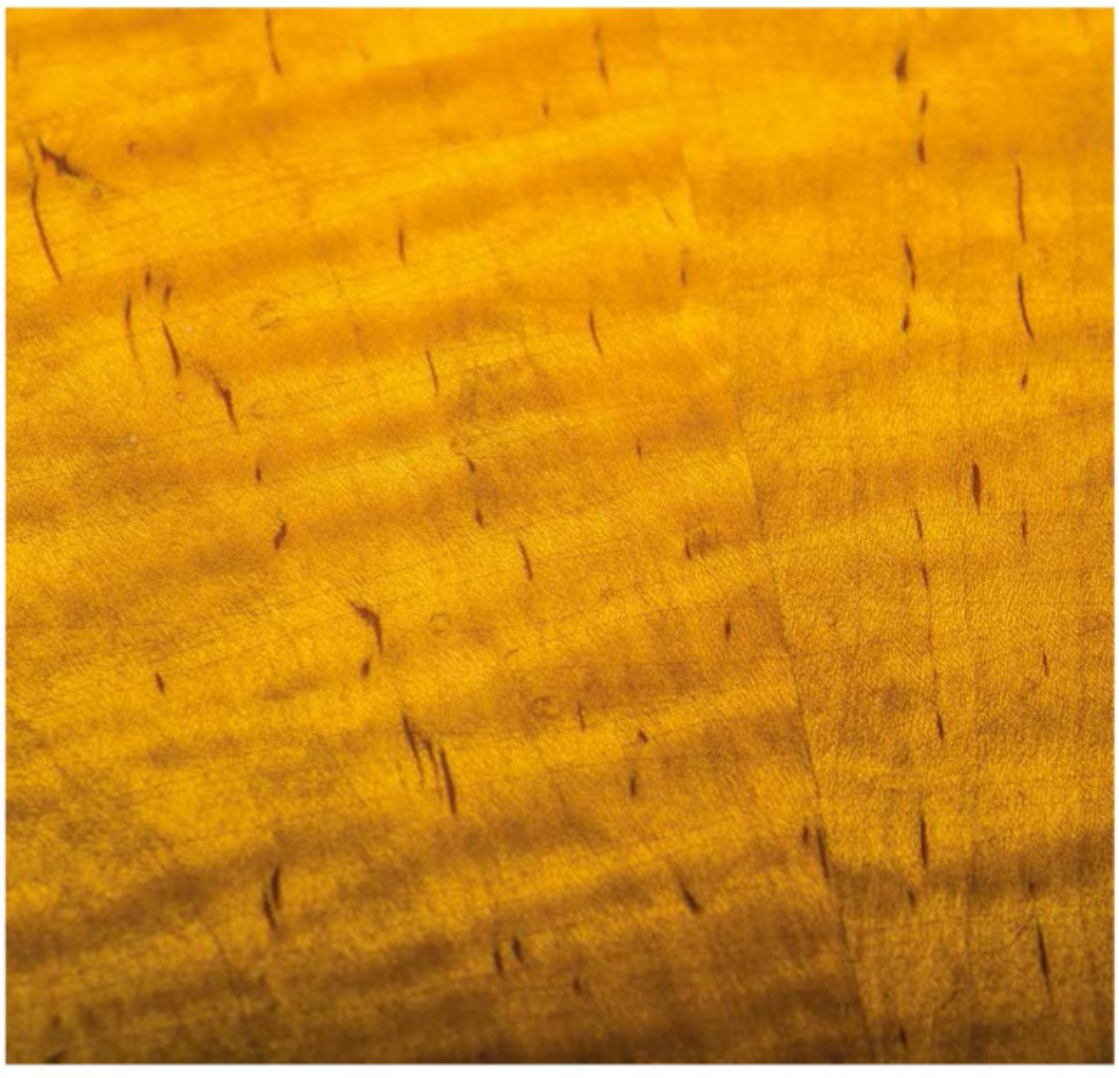
Visual evidence suggests this guitar was played a lot and the neck finish was duly worn through to the wood in patches. Maybe a previous owner didn't appreciate the played-in feel, so fresh lacquer was blown over the surviving finish.

Although this gives the neck the glossy feel of a much newer instrument, the wear pattern is still visible. Aside from the worn corner of the body adjacent to the cutaway, the back was left untouched and the finish on the top is completely original.

Like many Bursts, the Richrath's fingerboard has been levelled during a recent refret. It's quite easy to see because the fingerboard-binding height tapers downwards towards the body and the tops of some side dots edge into the rollover.

According to the luthier who carried out the refret, levelling the 'board was unavoidable – someone had attempted to repair fingerboard wear divots with filler and there was also a very slight twist. There certainly isn't now: there are no playability issues whatsoever.

It also helps that string pressure hasn't caused the original wireless ABR-1 bridge to sag noticeably.



There's a slight curve, but the string radius remains good and the strings are always where your pick or fingers expect – unlike some vintage Gibsons.

We suspect the Richrath has seen more sunshine than smoky bars, because although it's unblemished, the top has almost faded into an 'unburst'. There's still a hint of extra darkness around the edges of the deep amber lacquer, though and the vivid original cherry red survives as a pickguard-shaped shadow.

The retreated sunburst reveals even more of the outrageous flame and mineral streaks in the bookmatched maple. It has an almost holographic appearance, and when the light hits it at the right angle, the effect is breathtaking.

PLUGGED IN

Having played numerous sunburst Les Pauls from the golden era, we've learned that the reality can differ from the widely held fantasy. Some fondly imagine that 1950s Bursts exemplify the raw power, endless sustain and sheer grit of the ultimate rock guitar. Not all Bursts are created equal, but the Richrath ticks those boxes better than most.

It's certainly on the heavier end of the late-50s spectrum, although it's relatively lightweight

ABOVE The Richrath has never needed any headstock repairs and was never drilled for Grover or Schaller tuners

LEFT The Richrath's serial number is all present and correct on the back of the headstock

LEFT BOTTOM The tuner with the darker button is a replacement, but it's an earlier '53-'56 no-line Kluson

KEY FEATURES

PRICE £POA
DESCRIPTION Solidbody electric guitar. Made in the USA
BUILD Mahogany body with figured maple cap, set mahogany neck, bound Brazilian rosewood fingerboard, 22 frets
HARDWARE Kluson tuners, wireless ABR-1 bridge, aluminium stopbar tailpiece
ELECTRICS 2x PAF humbucking pickups, 2x volume, 2x tone, 3-way toggle switch
FINISH Nitrocellulose cherry sunburst
SCALE LENGTH 624mm/24.6"
NECK WIDTH 42mm at nut, 52.5mm at 12th fret
NECK DEPTH 22.5mm at first fret, 24mm at 12th fret
STRING SPACING 37.5mm at nut, 50.5mm at bridge
WEIGHT 4.35kg/9.6lb
CONTACT Lucky Fret Music Co luckyfret.com

compared to some P-90 Goldtops and 1970s Customs and we suspect that has a bearing on this guitar's dynamics.

Uncovered double-white PAFs are a first for this writer, and they present an opportunity to assess the often-debated issue of uncovered humbuckers sounding louder and brighter than those with covers intact. We are able to use the Richrath on some studio recordings and discover it has an extraordinary ability to sit in a track. Without excessive brightness or edginess, the subtleties of its tone cut straight through and there's an evenness to the dynamic

response that keeps the Richrath right at the front of a mix.

At the same time, an explosive blast of harmonic overtones characterises the attack, along with massively solid single notes and an overall density that makes individual chords sound like they're double-tracked. It doesn't take long to determine that this is an out-and-out rock Burst, with exceptional cutting power, otherworldly sustain and sheer balls.

Given its stellar rockin' abilities, the Richrath's clean tones come as a bit of a surprise. These are not especially bright-sounding PAFs and there's nothing to suggest that the cover removal has enhanced the upper mids or extended the treble. But they do sound more powerful than the DC readings alone might suggest – 7.96k (neck) and 8.74k (bridge).

Both pickups are very clear and we encounter a fluid mellowness in the neck position that's pleasingly devoid of any wooliness in the low end. The bridge position sounds slightly less open and transparent, but compensates with a chewy midrange bark and a hint of cocked-wah resonance.

That said, all the controls operate exactly as we would expect on a 1950s Gibson, so the tonal range and clean-up abilities are exceptional.

Some describe 50s Bursts as being like Telecasters on steroids, partly because they can be so snappy and airy. That broadly tallies with our Burst experience thus far, but less so with the Richrath, because it couldn't be mistaken for anything other than a Les Paul.

Despite its rocking attributes, the Richrath is not such a wild ride as the Duggie Lock Burst, which Lucky Fret sold shortly before we featured it in early 2018. That guitar seems to have a mind of its own that obliges players to either wrestle back control or hang on for the ride. In contrast, the Richrath has a milder manner and is easier to play, but by no means lacks sonic intrigue.

It's claimed that some sunburst Les Pauls aren't that special, and no doubt some are better than others, but we have yet to play an original Burst that truly disappoints. They are all unique, to some extent, and although the Richrath is by far the most rock-oriented Burst we've tested, it more than holds its own against the rest of them.

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

Gibson Custom 60th Anniversary 1959 Les Paul Standard **£5,199,** Eastman SB59/v-GB **£1,999,** Patrick James Eggle Macon Single Cut **£4,200**

ABOVE As with many vintage Bursts, there are visible mineral streaks in the maple that show up as dark lines

OPPOSITE LEFT The darker areas reveal where the finish was worn through to the wood, but the neck was later oversprayed

OPPOSITE RIGHT TOP Besides the pickup swap, the control wiring is untouched and features four properly working pots and two paper-in-oil bumblebee capacitors

OPPOSITE RIGHT MIDDLE The guitar has recently had a refret and the 'board was levelled in the process

OPPOSITE BOTTOM The guitar retains its original Catalin switch tip

CUSTOM MADE
VOLUME

THREE THIRTY-FIVE

AN ORAL HISTORY OF THE GIBSON ES-335

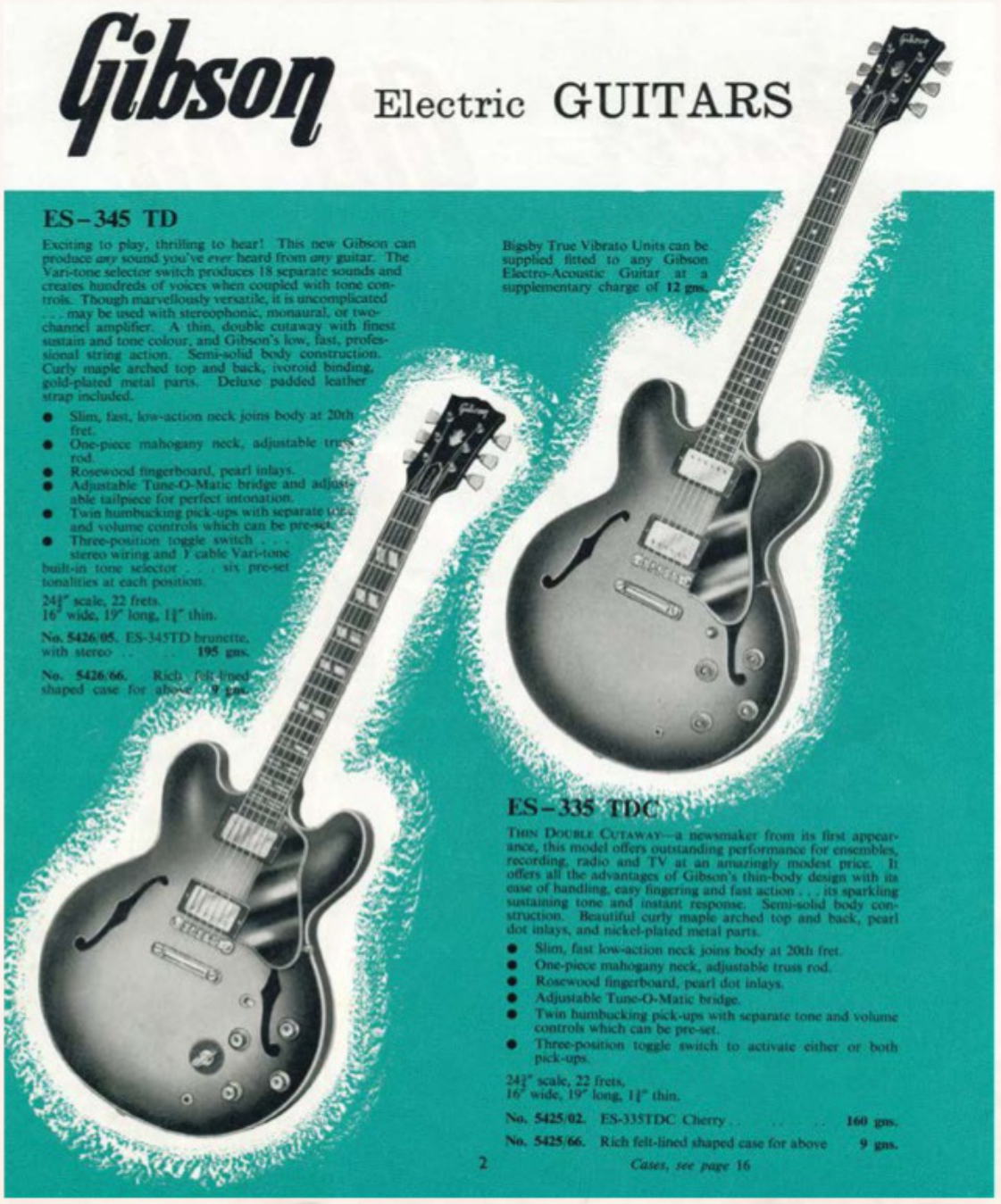
Although it arrived during the same year as the sunburst Les Paul, Flying V and Explorer, the ES-335 may be the greatest and most versatile electric guitar ever crafted within the hallowed walls of 225 Parsons St, Kalamazoo. Here, iconic figures such as Ted McCarty, Seth Lover, Mark Knopfler and Larry Carlton recount the tale of the model's revolutionary development and enduring influence…

WORDS TONY BACON

This is the oral history of the ES-335, the revolutionary semi-solid electric that Gibson introduced in 1958. The 335's new construction placed a solid maple block in an otherwise hollow laminated-maple body, which had double cutaways for good access to the upper frets, and the guitar had a pair of Gibson's new humbucking pickups.

Three associated models appeared following the success of the 335: the stereo ES-345, the high-end ES-355, and the fully hollow ES-330. This 335 family of guitars would find favour with many players through the years, including BB King, Eric Clapton, Grant Green, Jorma Kaukonen, Alvin Lee, Lee Ritenour, Andy Summers, Noel Gallagher and JD Simo.

The voices here come from interviews I've conducted for my various books about Gibson. The people you'll hear from are Larry Carlton, the session guitarist who's worked with Steely Dan, Joni Mitchell, The Crusaders and more; Luther Dickinson, guitarist with North Mississippi Allstars; Don Felder, guitarist with the Eagles between 1974 and 2001; Mark Knopfler, ex-Dire Straits guitarist and solo artist; Seth Lover, who at Gibson (1952-67) devised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- Slim, fast, low-action neck joins body at 20th fret.
- One-piece mahogany neck, adjustable truss rod.
- Rosewood fingerboard, pearl inlays.
- Adjustable Tune-O-Matic bridge and adjustable tailpiece for perfect intonation.
- Twin humbucking pick-ups with separate tone and volume controls which can be pre-set.
- Three-position toggle switch . . . stereo wiring and Y cable Vari-tone built-in tone selector . . . six pre-set tonalities at each position.

24½" scale, 22 frets.
16" wide, 19" long, 1¾" thin.

No. 5426/05. ES-345TD brunette, with stereo . . . . . 195 gns.

No. 5426/66. Rich felt-lined shaped case for above . . . 9 gns.

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ES–335 TDC

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- Slim, fast low-action neck joins body at 20th fret.
- One-piece mahogany neck, adjustable truss rod.
- Rosewood fingerboard, pearl dot inlays.
- Adjustable Tune-O-Matic bridge.
- Twin humbucking pick-ups with separate tone and volume controls which can be pre-set.
- Three-position toggle switch to activate either or both pick-ups.

24½" scale, 22 frets.
16" wide, 19" long, 1¾" thin.

No. 5425/02. ES-335TDC Cherry . . . . . 160 gns.

No. 5425/66. Rich felt-lined shaped case for above . . . 9 gns.

2 *Cases, see page 16*

PREVIOUS SPREAD, LEFT
Recent Gibson USA and Gibson Memphis reissue models in Sunburst and Cherry

PREVIOUS SPREAD, RIGHT
Ted McCarty, the originator of the 335 family's ingenious feedback-suppressing centre-block construction

THIS SPREAD Gibson's promotional literature emphasised the range's thinline body, semi-solid construction and player-friendly neck

the firm's humbucking pickup; Phil Manzanera, guitarist with Roxy Music (1971-83 and recent reunions); Ted McCarty, who joined Gibson in 1948 and later became its president (1950-66); Eddie Phillips, guitarist with The Mark Four (1963-66) and The Creation (1966-68 and recent reunions); and Mike Voltz, who joined Gibson in 1984 and has overseen much of the company's ES-series production in recent years.

ORIGINS OF THE 335

Ted McCarty

"The idea for the 335 was primarily one I came up with to make a solidbody guitar in sound, but looking like a regular acoustic guitar. And we never patented that. I patented some [Moderne, Flying V, Explorer] because I knew what Leo would do. So if I had a patent, he wouldn't dare. A lot of the others, I never bothered with patenting. It costs money to patent a guitar shape or whatnot.

"Now, the difference between the 335 and the instruments that followed it, the 345 and 355, was primarily a matter of dressing them up. The 355 I think had gold parts on it, the 335 was the cheaper one: they went up the line. We put more inlays in the 345 and 355. You could dress these things up with binding – make it thicker, black-and-white, cream – like for the Les Paul."

Seth Lover

"Walt Fuller was the chief engineer at Gibson, the guy in charge and I did a lot of design work for him, I was in his department. Ted McCarty just wanted me to build a new pickup and I thought, Well, why don't we get an improvement? Because every time you got a regular guitar near an amplifier, you had to twist yourself to get away from the hum.

"So I thought, Gosh, there are humbucking choke coils, so why can't we build a humbucking pickup? A choke coil is where they have two coils wound, one on one leg, one on the other, and since they were wound and connected just right, they would eliminate any hum pick-up.

"We used it in audio amplifiers at Gibson in the early 50s, the GA-90 I think it was, which had a tone choke. If you put an ordinary coil, single coil, in there, it would pick up hum from the power transformer. I didn't want that, so I had them make me a humbucking choke coil."

Ted McCarty

"I came up with that idea of putting the block of wood down the middle of the 335. All I could think of was like a solidbody guitar with wings, instead of wood out there. Les Paul was probably right with his plank, but the thing is, that looked funny. So what we did was to make one that looked like a guitar, only it was hollow out here and solid down here. But it had a fine tone.

"The centre block as I remember was maple, good hard-rock maple. On top of that was spruce, because we kerfed it so that you could put the top on it and it would bend a little bit. I guess maybe that was top and bottom, because the block of wood was just plain flat sides. We had to fill the space between the block and the top and back. We started out with an idea of making one with a solid block down the middle and then, hey, wait a minute, we got to have something to fill it. So then we used spruce, and we may have even used some other soft wood. The block made the guitar stiffer, so it had a brighter tone than an acoustic. But it was a fake [laughs]. It looked like an acoustic, but it wasn't an acoustic, it was an electric."

Seth Lover

"I had in mind that if we can make humbucking chokes for amps, why can't we make humbucking pickups? So I designed the pickup. I think I had started work on it in '55, and it was in '57 I think they first started building them, they put them in the 175, a Les Paul, the 335, some other models. I gave it that humbucking name – it was bucking the hum that you pick up.

"When the sales force over in Chicago saw it, they said they didn't have anything to talk about. So [laughs] they wanted adjusting screws and that's why we brought it out with the adjusting screws. Also, I set the pickups in the guitar with the screws towards the bridge and towards the fingerboard. People wanted to know: why did I do that? For decorative purposes! [laughs].

"The reason for the different-colour bobbins? We used to buy our pickup bobbins and covers from a company over in South Haven, Michigan, called Hughes Plastics. Anyway, they ran out of black material, but they had white. We were not gonna stop production just for that. So we got white bobbins and I couldn't see any difference one from the other. And I think white was a better colour for winding the pickups, because you could see the wire in there a lot easier than you could with the black.

"They put the PAF label on the base because they started making them before they actually got the patent for it, so the patent was 'applied for'. Gbison didn't want to give [competitors] any information as to what patent to look up to make copies. I think that was the reason for it, because they carried on for quite a while."

FEEDBACK AND VIOLIN BOWS

Eddie Phillips

"I was in The Mark Four playing a Futurama and I think it must have been the end of 1963 when I saw a 335 in a local shop window. It was the look that made me buy it, the colour, the shine – such a nice guitar. I'd never seen one before. And it was a fantastic lot of money, I think it was a 150-something guineas, which was a colossal amount to pay for a guitar. I part-exchanged my Futurama and paid the rest on HP. Forever at one-and-six a week!

"What I did notice about the 335, straight away, was this feedback that I'd never experienced with the Futurama. I thought, Oh, it's making this noise, what am I going to do? And then I figured out you could use it. The 335 was great for feedback. It was a guitar just made for that sort of thing. It's almost like a dance with your amp. You have to position yourself right – and even then, you could position yourself in exactly the same place another night and it wouldn't work.

"But I'd got to a point where I could use feedback quite effectively. Also, I was trying to figure out a way to play something on the E string to keep it going, like a drone, while I hammered on some kind of solo with my left hand on the other strings.

"First I tried a hacksaw – I took out the blade and put a guitar string in, tried sawing across the E string, but that only resulted in me wearing three or four massive grooves in the bottom horn of my 335 from the ends of the saw [laughs]. So that obviously wasn't going to work.

"Next, I got a violin bow and tried that, and to my surprise it actually worked. Okay, it didn't do the guitar a great deal of good – but it didn't wreck it. It did the job.

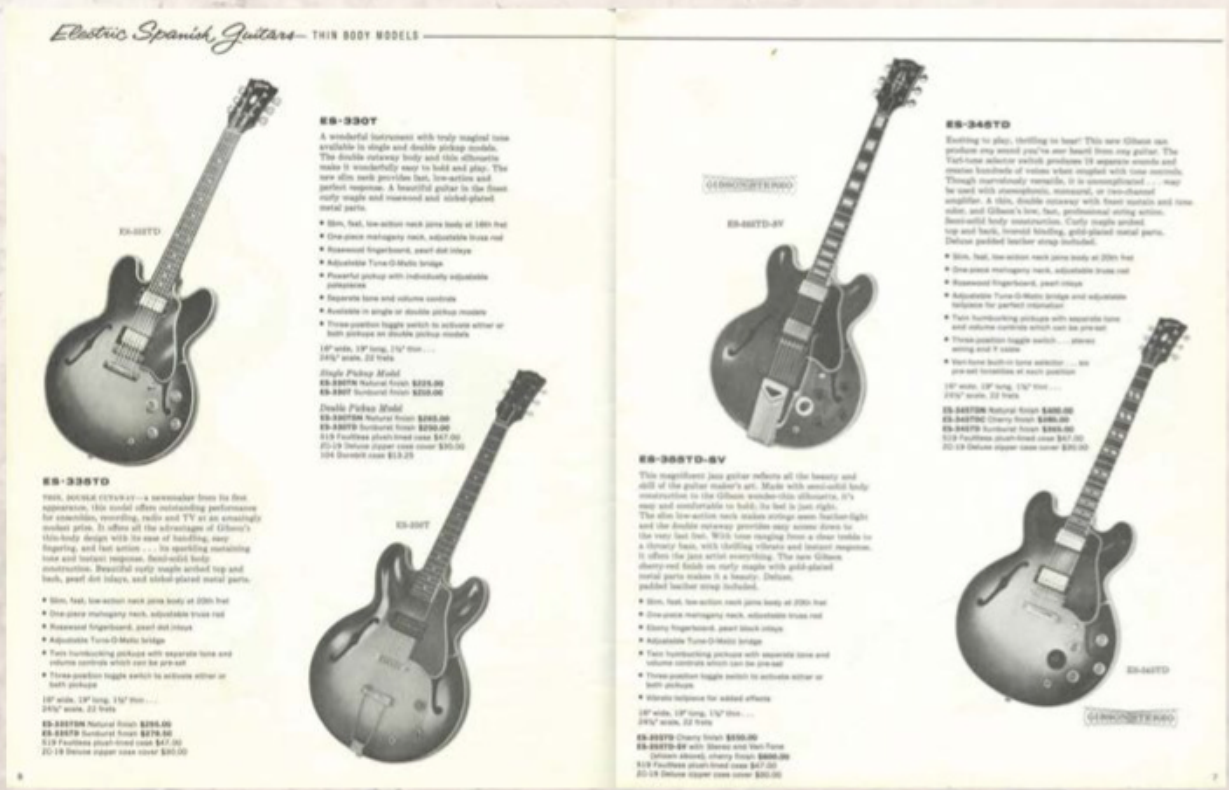
"The Mark Four had sort of gone into The Creation, and we came out of that mid-60s mod raving explosion on the London scene, just a mad, mad time. When I picked up the bow, you'd see the audience going oh, what's going on here? And you'll notice now in the online videos of the band that I removed the pickguard from my 335, because I had to make room for that downward stroke of the bow.

"Anyway, it was all part of this big fantastic thing that was going on. I tried to give it what I thought it needed. I suppose it was lucky that I found the 335. Some things you just don't realise at the time."

MISTER 335

Larry Carlton

"A friend of mine worked at the Mr B's For Music store in Palos Verdes, California. They had three different 335s hanging on the wall and I didn't plug them in, I just played them acoustically and chose the one that I ended up with. That was late 1969, first thing 1970. My decision was a very practical decision in the beginning, because I could cover many different sounds and things with that one guitar.



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The 38

Reclaimed Brazilian Rosewood and Dark Cedar, featuring an optional soundbox bevel.

"The ['68] 335 I chose that evening was very special, tone-wise. After doing sessions for a couple of years, '70 to '71, obviously my guitar sound was becoming part of the LA recording scene, and many of the other guitarists wanted to buy a 335 so that they would have that sound in their arsenal. They would ask me to go with them to help them pick one out. Like I said, I never plugged mine in, so when I would go with them to choose or to at least look at a few different 335s, we didn't plug them in, we just listened acoustically. Dennis Budimir, my good buddy, I helped him pick his – either that or I loaned him mine to take with him as a comparison.

"About 2009, a fan from the Midwest in the states contacted me through my office, said you're my favourite guitar player, said I have this 1968 335 that's been in my grandmother's closet or something, and I would like to donate it to you as a backup, if you like it. Can I send it? So I had him send it and it was killer. Just almost mint, you know? So I accepted that gift from that gentleman.

"It's a tobacco sunburst, doesn't have the red like mine has on the finish. So I bought a matching pair of old PAF pickups and put those in that guitar, just so I could experience what that tone would be like sometimes. It's so rich and big. And those are the only two 335s I own: my original '68 and that gift.

"One day, I was between sessions, walking down the street to have lunch with Louie Shelton, the great session player. I said: 'Louie, when you play on a record, I hear it on the radio and your guitar is right there by the vocalist. When I play, I'm just kinda in the background. What's up?' He had a great answer that changed my whole focus on studio playing. He said: 'I try to think like an arranger.' And I was thinking like a guitar player. The lightbulb went on. Think like an arranger! That's when I became definitely a better session player."

THE ONE THAT GOT AWAY

Phil Manzanera

"When I joined Roxy Music in 1971, I had a 335. And they sort of laughed and said that doesn't really go with the Roxy image: you'll have to get a Strat. Eno's milkman sold him a Strat for £30 and he sold it to me for £70, showing what a great businessman he is. I then had a white Strat, and I used my 335 Gibson for feedback and stuff in the studio – but it wasn't really allowed to be seen on stage because of the image.

"Some guitars, you lend it to someone and you never see it again. There's been a whole bunch of those. But my 335 got stolen, in the days of the Transit van, somewhere in Plymouth. It was the days of greater innocence: the roadies would go in and be packing the van and leave the doors open at the back and so the thieves just helped themselves. I got back to my mother's place and they handed me my equipment and I said: 'Where's the 335? Oh sugar.' Really annoying."

ABOVE Seymour Duncan (foreground) with his "humbucker mentor" Seth Lover, the creator of the humbucking pickup

THE BB KING EFFECT

Mark Knopfler

"I heard *Live At The Regal*, BB King, when I was 15 and that was a really big record for me. The 335 had entered my life with a bang! The magnificent 335. I never thought when I was that age that one day I would own the nicest 335 in the world and the nicest Les Paul in the world – I couldn't conceive of that. My blonde '59 335 is just unreal to play, a fantastic instrument, a dream of a guitar, just like my '58 Les Paul. They're both really something *other*.

"It wasn't really until comparatively late that I got hold of them and it was then that I realised what I'd been missing all those years. The slim necks are beautiful in their way, perhaps better for a jazz player or an orchestral kind of player who puts the ball of his thumb in the back of the middle of the neck. But if you hold it like a plumber, which I do, then the fat neck seems to suit my big mitts. It feels more comfortable and faster to me.

"I can get up a fair old lick on any Gibson neck and the slim ones have their own charm, definitely, but my own personal preference is for a fat neck. That combination – fat neck, big frets – to me is killer.

I have a very nice ’59 Les Paul too, which is very similar to the ’58, and a couple of other 335s, but there’s just something about my ’58 Les Paul and ’59 335. It’s like my ’53 Super 400 – there are certain things that just do it. A guitar will just suit you. I can’t really explain it better than that.”

Don Felder

“Back in the 60s, the sound of the day was that kind of sustaining blues. Clapton had a lot to do with that, but I remember seeing BB King when I was 14 or something and he had his Lucille at the time. It wasn’t the Lucille model – of course it hadn’t come out – but he had either a 335 or 355, whatever it was, I think it was red in those days, not black. And he had a Super Reverb amp. I went up to the stage and looked at his amp, and the volume was 10, the treble was on 10, the mid and the bass, everything was just turned up to 10 and he would turn up the guitar. And it would sound great! You don’t need any pedals if you’ve got the right guitar and amp. I think a lot of tone is in your hands, how you fret the instrument, how you pluck the string, the kind of pick you use. It’s all in the hands of the beholder. Joe Walsh could pick up the same guitar that I have, and it sounds totally different to when I play it. It’s in the hands of the beholder. Unlike piano, where you press a key and it sounds the same no matter who’s playing it.”

BELOW For many, the ES-335 represents the perfect middle ground between the solidbody Les Paul and Gibson’s more ornate hollowbodies... especially when equipped with a Bigsby vibrato

A BRIGHT ELUSIVE CHERRY

Mike Voltz, Gibson Memphis

“One of the big things that people are really looking for in reissue 335s today is a colour-correct cherry. We have that colour now, and it’s thanks to Warren Haynes. We were going to reproduce his ’61 335. I thought it would be simple. I used to do colour repair, and I thought, Okay: this’ll be a piece of cake. Well, it took us three months. We stained at least 50 samples of wood. I was two months into it, and I went to [guitar ageing expert] Tom Murphy and talked to him. I said: ‘Tom, I’m dying.’ He says: ‘Oh yeah, you can’t match that colour, I’ve got about…’ and he puts his fingers out like he had maybe half an inch of stain left. He says: ’That’s all I know that exists.’ I felt better, because I was just feeling like an idiot.

“But the guy who was running our finish department never gave up. He’d say: I’m done, it’s perfect! And everyone would look at it and say, well, it’s closer. But he persisted, and he came up with the colour. He brought in the chemist from the outfit that supplies all of our finishes and lacquers and they just kept at it until they finally got it. It took three months of solid work. But we have that colour now.”

THE REVOLUTIONARY INSTRUMENT

Gibson catalogue, 1958

“This revolutionary new double cutaway, thin electric Spanish guitar meets today’s needs for individual performance, large or small ensembles, recording, television and radio. Engineered after consultation with leading players, the ES-335T presents a striking appearance and sensational response. New body construction, with solid fitting neck, pickups and adjustable bridge, provides the solidity essential for clear, sparkling, sustaining tone.”

Luther Dickinson

“I think the 335 is the last great invention of the electric guitar. They already had invented the electric solidbody; they already had the electric hollowbody. And then right at the apex of the whole generation, they put the two together. And there it was, you know?”

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COLLECTION

VAVÁ VOOM

Vanessa Wheeler's genre-bending take on modern guitar pop is as exhilarating and unpredictable as her guitar collection. We head to Vanessa's Los Angeles home to check out the technicolour tools of her trade…

WORDS MICHAEL JAMES ADAMS **PHOTOGRAPHY** ELEANOR JANE

Los Angeles is a city absolutely brimming with talent ranging from aspiring pop stars, weekend warriors and barroom brawlers to singer-songwriters who set up shop on the Sunset Strip hoping to nab your attention and a record deal. Often portrayed as cutthroat, the constant grind of the LA scene can seem overwhelming to newcomers; and even once you've acclimated, making a splash is a full-time job. With each new artist trying to capture a piece of the market, cultivating 'relevance' and chasing trends, far fewer actually seem to be carving a path for themselves on their own terms. Vanessa Wheeler is one such artist.

Under the pseudonym VAVÁ, Wheeler painstakingly crafts music that bridges the gaps between pop, traditional Brazilian guitar, electronica, and R&B. Her voice soars into the ether above her grounded, intricate guitar work, much of which filters through her Brazilian roots and jazz-guitar fluency. Her right hand is a force of rhythm, which she augments with time-based effects and a particularly clear, dynamic tone, perfectly suited for her complex open-chord voicings.

"Music was just a natural part of growing up," she ruminates. "My education was my mom playing what she thought she'd heard on the radio, which is another filter, I suppose. She'd play these classical flourishes and turns, she'd add them to everything."

Thanks to her mother, Vanessa was heavily influenced by Western classical and African music, bossa nova and even traditional chorinho, which translates to 'little lament' and features upbeat rhythms and improvisation. Vanessa describes it as "truly sad, melancholy party music". And many years later during her stint at Berklee, she would return to chorinho for inspiration while studying composition.

Eventually, she latched onto the sounds of Ace Of Base, New Order, Brazilian pop, and European electronica. Later, she listened to Patty Griffin "obsessively" and soon picked up an acoustic guitar, leaning into the singer-songwriter genre, although the acoustic part didn't stick. "I grew tired of comparisons to other singer-songwriters, so I ditched the acoustic and picked up electric instead."

GOING ELECTRIC

Released in 2018, *The Other Side* EP shows off these influences along with her spindly, fractured style and heartfelt, relatable songwriting. Collaborator Francisco Ojeda, who simultaneously helms bass

and beat duties, lends his punchy production to her songs resulting in an arresting listening experience. That goes double for Wheeler's lyricism, wherein she earnestly tackles the topics of reckoning with love and sexuality, struggling with depression and suicidal thoughts, fear of the unknown, musical integrity and finding the strength to confront a world that's often hostile to her personhood as a woman, an immigrant and a member of the LGBTQIA+ community.

Vanessa's snappy signature tone is no accident: she employs compact amps, usually some blend of tube and solid-state elements with treble-forward equalisation and emphasis on percussive frequencies. Her tone is driving, but not overdriven; robust, but not overbearing; clear, but not clean. "I favour smaller amps because I'm hard of hearing and very sensitive to loud sounds," she says. "Plus I don't have the luxury of a studio – I play in my house – so I want to be able to get a little grime without blowing my head off."

Her amp rig most often consists of a Benson Dizzy Bird tube reverb unit and one-watt amp paired with a Quilter 101 Mini which she uses as a preamp via the Benson's direct input. This gives her the ability to drastically alter the basic tone of the Dizzy Bird at a "satisfying bedroom level".

Recently, Vanessa's been experimenting with the ZT Jazz Club, a solid-state 12-inch combo which packs a lot of sound into a small enclosure. She says she's surprised by the response and room-filling sound of the ZT, remarking: "It's the first solid-state amp I've played that does the thing that I like… there's a sizzle to it, still hairy but responds like a clean amp."

ECHO CHAMBER

Dressing up her paradoxically icy and thumping tone are a host of outboard delay and reverb units that function as a welcome part of her writing regimen. "Delay is a rhythmic partner and having grown up playing by myself, it tends to keep me from rushing."

Among her favourites are the pedals of Strymon Engineering: the Deco for saturated tape slapback and the Volante, a multi-head delay modelled after the Binson Echorec that's much adored by Wheeler for its tactile feel and MIDI-friendly versatility. For reverb, it's the Strymon blueSky and the Datachoir x Old Blood Noise Endeavors Rêver, which she calls out as "a fantastic 80s reverse reverb that's really great for atmospheric sounds". Vanessa's guitars are just as thoughtfully constructed as her signal chain: a

THIS SPREAD 'Cake' is a custom Creston Lea creation. The cake motif was handpainted by artist Sarah Ryan and the guitar's 26.75-inch scale neck is tuned B to B

THIS PAGE Wheeler's Chartreuse Harvester, named 'Catbyrd', is a shorter-scale sparklefest with a sawn-off Bigsby created by luthier Anthony Paine

collection that features heavily modified and bespoke custom-built pieces made to meet her specifications. There are a few common features shared between most of them, including a preference for the offset-body style as well as the requisite Jazzmaster-style vibrato. For Vanessa, having a good vibrato unit such as the Mastery gives breath to her music. "It adds colour to the tone where it's emanating pitch, but it's also like a sigh." She also cites the length of string behind the bridge with notable enthusiasm: "I love those overtones in the back."

The guitar that helped her home in on her particular tonal needs is called Porpoise, a pink Fender Pawn Shop Offset Special from the early 2010s that started out stock, but quickly became a testbed for new ideas. "My first love," she interjects with a chuckle; she seems genuinely grateful for the guitar's patience over the years. This semi-hollow Fender led her down a windy road of discovery to some surprising conclusions, such as finding the perfect pickup for her unique style, the Lollar Thunderbird bass pickup.

"It was a suggestion by Jason Lollar. I wanted Firebird pickups in Jazzmaster housings, but the string spacing wasn't ideal. He recommended using the larger coil of his Thunderbird pickup instead. I often find the bridge position of most hollowbodies thin and nasal and I wanted a beefier sound. It's perfect." Porpoise has been outfitted with two of these massive-sounding Lollar pickups, Mastery hardware and Gotoh locking tuners.

Of her sparkly Chartreuse Harvester, Vanessa excitedly declares: "Catbyrd is the oldest-feeling new guitar I have ever played." To her, it's as if Australian builder Anthony Paine imparts 30 years of wear into his work, but that's not to say it's relic'd from the factory or otherwise abused: it's the feel of the neck, the way the guitar's lively character pokes out of a mix, the way the pickups complement the semi-hollow construction from locally sourced Australian woods.

The guitar deviates a bit from her usual preferences, with its 23.5-inch scale length, Lance Amplification Wide Range mini-humbuckers, exclamation point f-hole and chopped Bigsby B-16 vibrato – a suggestion made by Anthony that Vanessa wholeheartedly embraced. "Anthony is such a mastermind, I didn't feel comfortable deviating from his aesthetic," she explains. "I value freedom in artistry, I don't want to take that away from a luthier."

THIS PAGE 'Porpoise' is a much-modified Fender Pawn Shop Offset Special from the early 2010s and now has Thunderbird bass pickups, a Mastery bridge and Gotoh tuners

CAKE CANDY

'Cake' is perhaps the flashiest, most eye-catching model in her whole collection. Finished in the summer of 2018, Cake marks the blossoming of a beautiful relationship between Wheeler and Vermont-based builder Creston Lea. Creston marries the strange and beautiful alike in a classic American bolt-on guitar package with unparalleled skill and an eye for detail. This bold and vibrant example is no different, with Mastery hardware on a bound and chambered mahogany T-style body and a 26.75-inch scale neck, tuned B to B with locking Gotoh tuners. There's also a hand-painted piece of cake on the neck heel by frequent Creston collaborator, Sarah Ryan.

Thanks to its striking bright-yellow finish, herringbone purfling and pink-insert Curtis Novak Guyatone pickup in the neck, it's the kind of guitar that elicits double takes and more than its fair share of questions after the set. For Vanessa, it's not as much an exercise in shock value as much as it is an expression of the way she sees her art.

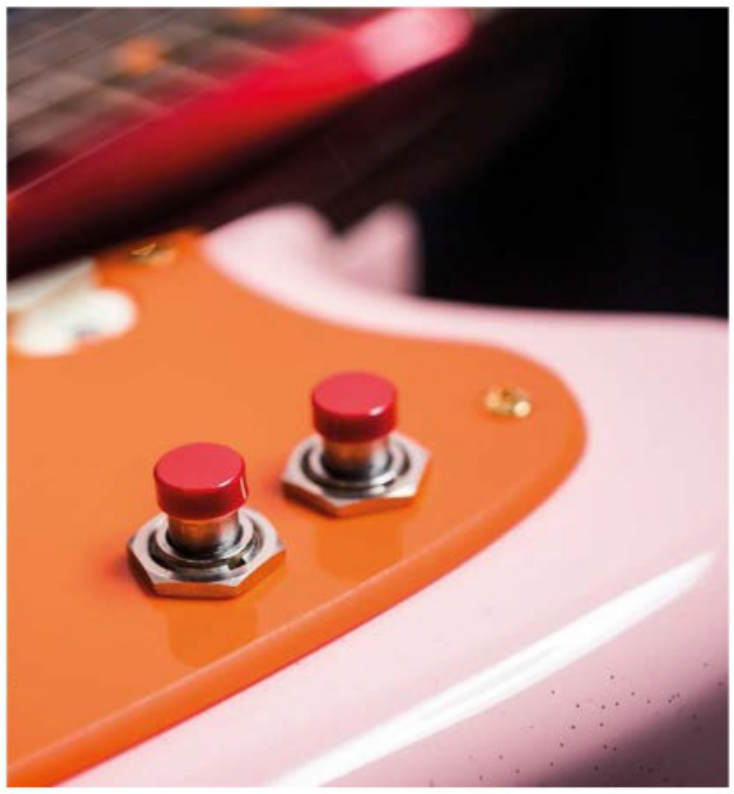
"The pace of my music is in that baritone; slow-moving and percussive. It's the first experiment that worked out." She wouldn't tell you this, but her music is also just as colourful.

Throughout years of experimenting with different guitars, Vanessa realised that the one crucial design element she couldn't overcome with most mass-produced instruments was body size. An unabashed fan of the sparkly late-90s Squier Super-Sonic models, she found that even that reduced and repurposed Jaguar shape couldn't give her what she needed.

The lower horn juts out too far for ease of access for her left-hand technique in the upper register; the contours weren't quite accommodating enough; the weight was becoming too much for her shoulders and it'd take quite a lot of modification for the body to accept her preferred Mastery bridge and vibrato kit. So she took her many complaints to Creston and the two teamed up to design something fresh that ticks all of the right boxes for Wheeler.

"For better, for worse, relationships lead the way in this industry… and Creston's the kind of guy who makes you want to work with him. He's kind, he's witty, he listens and he's a guitar-building genius."

Their back-and-forth continued for some time, with drawings and what-ifs sent as the spirit moved. Soon, they landed on this minimalistic, almost Art Deco 'Creature' body shape, and Vanessa couldn't be more in love.



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CREATURE COMFORTS

Creature features a torrefied alder body, an all-rosewood neck and two push-button controls for series operation of the two Lollar Jaguar pickups as well as a high-pass 'strangle' switch. Taking into account its gold Mastery hardware, matching gold EVO frets, orange plastic fretboard inlays and pickguard and subtly sparkled pink finish, Vanessa calls this "the most ostentatious guitar I own". No argument here.

The hard work of design seems to have paid off for both parties, as it seems that other players have ordered Creature models of their own. But for Wheeler, the real benefit here is all about alleviating her own physical discomfort.

"I have scoliosis and that means my shoulders are out of whack," Vanessa explains. "Even carrying groceries hurts me, I loathe it. That's why my guitars are so small and light."

Thankfully, the guitar she and Creston dreamed up so far exceeded her expectations that she immediately ordered another with some minor spec tweaks. She had plans for a less glitzy instrument in a different colour, but the loss of a family member made clear the path to take.

18+

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"My dog passed away while she was living with my mother in a different state. I never got to say goodbye, I was distraught. I thought that this would be a nice homage to my dog who I love so much."

Creston mixed a deep Oxblood paint for the body – a perfect mate to the solid rosewood neck – and as a tribute to the pup's brindle coat, a back-painted tortoise 'guard to accentuate the yellow-orange stripes in the material.

A splash of gold glitter was applied to the body during the finishing process to give it some flash and match the gold hardware. When all was right, Vanessa gave it the same name as the furry friend who served as its namesake: Pony.

As usual, this guitar features locking Gotoh tuners, a Mastery bridge and vibrato kit and a hulking gold Lollar Thunderbird pickup in the bridge. One deviation that may have changed the game for her is the addition of a Lollar Jazzmaster pickup in the neck position, the combination of the two lending a uniquely tactile feel to her fingerstyle technique.

"It's like writing with a ballpoint pen where you can hear the way it moves across the surface of the paper. It reminds me of the sound of a good P-Bass where you hear your hand rolling down the fretboard. The sound translates from your fingers to your ears. It's persuasive."

LATEST SQUEEZE

The last guitar we're showing off from Vanessa's collection also happens to be her most recent purchase. Phantasma is an early 1950s Gibson LG-2 she compulsively scored from Chicago Music Exchange purely because of its small body and swooping, oversized pickguard.

"I saw it on Reverb.com and fell in love immediately," she says. "I just felt very drawn to it – it was meant for me."

It's a bit of an odd purchase as acoustic guitars are a novelty for her these days, but Wheeler says that the giant pickguard makes this guitar perfect for strumming early in the morning. "It's so quiet, I can play it at 7am without having to wear headphones, but it still has loads of personality."

Aside from the blatant pickguard modification, the guitar is largely as it was when it left the factory, save for a few worrisome cracks, which kept the price low. Once she hands it off to a luthier for those fixes, she plans on installing a Gemini pickup in the sound hole for live performance. As it is, the guitar plays

FACING PAGE 'Creature' is a reimagining of the Fender Super-Sonic short-scale model – also designed in collaboration with Creston Lea – featuring two Lollar Jaguar pickups and Wheeler's beloved Mastery bridge

THIS PAGE 'Pony' is a tribute to Vanessa's dearly departed pet dog, with its tortoiseshell pickguard reflecting the pup's brindled coat

“I CAN PLAY IT AT 7AM WITHOUT HAVING TO WEAR HEADPHONES, BUT IT STILL HAS LOADS OF PERSONALITY. I FELT VERY DRAWN TO IT – IT WAS MEANT FOR ME”

ABOVE ‘Phantasma’ is an early 1950s Gibson LG-2, currently awaiting a trip to the luthier for a few key fixes

exactly the way she likes, with a low action and a comfortable neck.

Currently, Vanessa is busy working on her next record with a fresh batch of completed songs that she hopes to unleash sometime in the next year. She and Ojeda have teamed up again to produce the tracks and fine-tune their live elements as well, hoping to “create a consistent show with a flow to it, one that doesn’t feel so singer-songwriter”.

In this, there are talks of lighting cues, sound transitions, even a broader story element to tie the whole thing together. All of this seems to be in line with her goal of getting back on the road. “I wanna tour. I want to get out there and play in front of people. I’m also not opposed to the idea of playing for other people, so you know, please hire me!”

Vanessa can be found on Instagram at @vavaenvivo as well as via vavamusique.com

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INDUSTRY INSIDER

CHAPMAN GUITARS

INTERVIEW JOSH GARDNER

Chapman Guitars' innovative 'collaborative design' approach has seen the UK company become one of the guitar world's biggest recent success stories. Chapman's co-owner Matt Hornby tells us more…

How did you get into guitar?
"I played classical piano from when I was six years old, then when I went to high school I wanted to learn guitar, as it was much cooler! I started with a 3/4-size nylon-string acoustic from Argos and a couple of years later, got my first Squier, a 10-watt SoundKing amp and I was away. When I was 18, I got my first 'proper' setup – Gibson Les Paul Classic in a cherry 'burst and Marshall AVT150 head with 4x12. I was (and still am) a huge GN'R fan, so as far as I was concerned at the time, there was no other guitar setup!"

When did you first start building?
"Growing up, I helped my dad renovate three different houses and, living in the countryside, me and my friends would always be building something, whether it be an off-road go-kart, trebuchet or a treehouse. I went through school doing well in anything to do with practical problem-solving, eventually studying Aviation Engineering at university and working for an engineering company after that. All the way through, I was playing in bands and hanging out with musicians. Since being involved in Chapman Guitars in around 2012, I've learned a whole lot about guitar building and it's been fun to apply the knowledge I've learnt elsewhere to music, my real passion."

What was the moment you realised you had a viable business on your hands?
"When I joined, Lee [Anderton] and Rob [Chapman] had done an awesome job in setting up the marketing and supply model. It was really when we took Chapman to NAMM in 2014 and started getting interest from retailers outside the UK and Europe that things started getting really exciting. A part of my role has been building this retailer base. After the full line-up refresh in 2017, things got even more exciting, with some great attention on the company. You can now walk into a guitar shop and buy a Chapman in around 25 countries worldwide – crazy!"

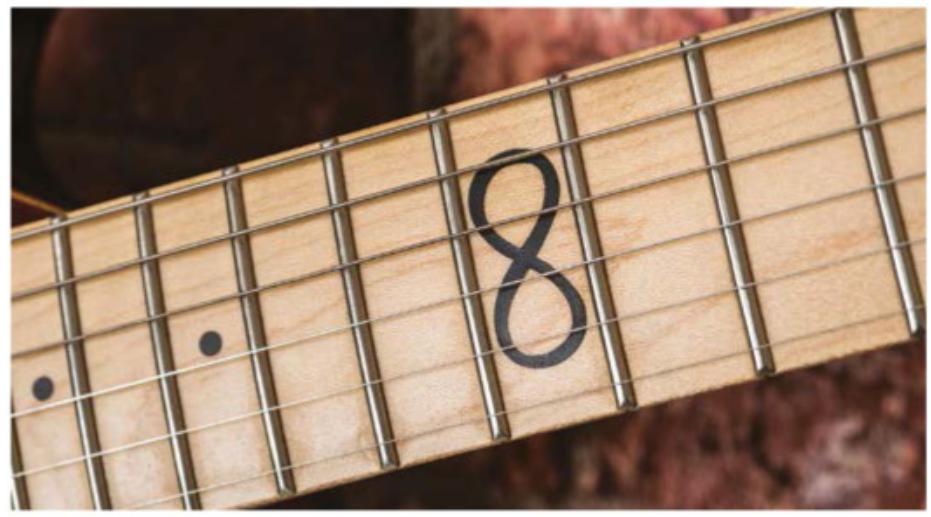
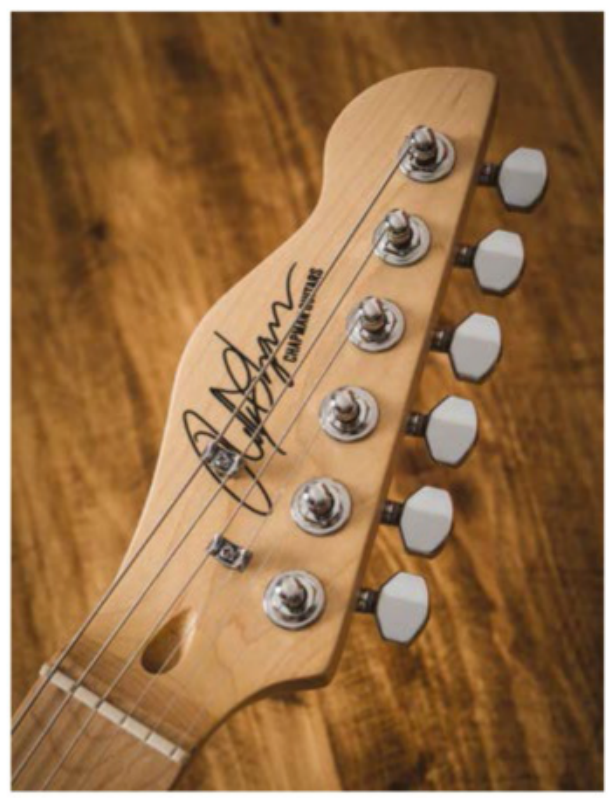
Did you have any investors or grants to help you establish yourself?
"One of my favourite things about Chapman is that we've been completely self-sufficient, with no outside investment. Andertons were amazing in supporting us with administration help in the early years. We've reinvested a lot along the way into building the brand and our marketing, all with a long-term view."

At what point did you feel like you 'nailed' your branding?
"We refreshed the whole Chapman line-up in 2017 based on feedback from fans and customers, debuting at Winter NAMM, along with a new website and rebrand. We went through hundreds of logo/colour iterations until we narrowed it down to one that finally clicked. For me, it brought together everything about what we'd done so far, without being a drastic change."

What's your proudest moment to date?
"I've mentioned it a couple of times already, but announcing a full new line-up, rebrand and website in early 2017 was a huge challenge but really rewarding when we pulled it off. The year ahead of the launch was working very long days, seven-day weeks in the old Chapman office and storage facility – my flat! It's great to think back to that time and what the challenges were, to where we are now."

What do you think are the biggest challenges and opportunities for the guitar industry in 2019?
"I'm definitely not the first person to say that the internet has changed everything, particularly with how fast things move. I feel like there's still real opportunities for collaboration between different companies and with artists in ways that haven't been explored yet. For me, that's one of the most exciting parts of the times we're in."

So what's next?
"We have some very cool releases on the horizon – stay tuned! I'm particularly excited about the new Ghost Fret Pro Exotic Wood Special Run coming up."

Find out more at chapmanguitars.co.uk



ABOVE The Chapman line has expanded exponentially over the years, with 34 models and variations in the current line-up. The V2 Ghost Fret Standard is reviewed on p106

SHOP TALK

MICHAEL SWART

SWART AMPLIFIERS FOUNDER AND PROPRIETOR

WORDS DAVE HUNTER

Fuelled by an aesthetic born in the electronics of the late 40s, 50s and early 60s, Michael Swart has earned a reputation for creating hand-made guitar amplifiers of style and substance. Delivering a sound and performance that has proved strangely applicable to today's music, Swart's retro creations have also earned a diehard following in the process…

There's a phenomenon I've come to recognise any time I've dropped in to peruse one of the many amp-related online forums – something I like to call 'research', but which is probably just the same quest for that quick endorphin hit most of us indulge in when diverting from our daily workload for a few moments – which we might dub the 'how soon until Swart is mentioned?' effect.

Click on a thread that begins with one person's search for a great-sounding, portable, lower-wattage combo and you're almost guaranteed that among the first three or four replies, you'll see: "Get a Swart AST!", a sentiment that will undoubtedly be reconfirmed throughout the thread.

And with good reason: Michael Swart's creations are not only great little works of retro-modern art and easy front-seat-of-the-Fiat 500 portables, they just *sound great*, one after the other. And don't just take my word for it: Jeff Tweedy, Dean Wareham, Matthew Sweet, Joey Santiago, Trey Anastasio, Buddy Miller, Keith Urban, Ray LaMontagne, Vince Gill and Michael Kiwanuka have all confirmed the point in their backlines. But for all that, there's much more to this North Carolina-based designer, manufacturer and studio owner than those funky combos that look like something you pulled from your grandad's closet.

FLOWERS AND MILK

For the young Swart, the electric guitar and its related electronics came along as a means of escaping what might otherwise have been the inevitability of his Dutch heritage – and with it, the small farm in Castle Hayne, North Carolina, on which he grew up in the 1970s and 80s. "We're talking flowers and milk in the past," he tells us. "The only flowers and milk these days are in my yard and in my refrigerator.

"When I was young, my parents thought it would be a wonderful thing if their son started playing classical piano. I figure they were hoping I wouldn't

ABOVE The Atomic Space Tone is Swart's best-known amp, delivering reverb, tremolo and 18-22 watts of searing tone through a 12-inch speaker

OPPOSITE Michael putting one of his designs through its paces

“I WILL NEVER FORGET THAT FIRST GUITAR AND IT’S A RATHER PRIZED POSSESSION WHICH STILL SITS IN MY STUDIO IN ALL ITS HIGH-SCHOOL JAZZ-BAND SPLENDOUR”

ABOVE Swart’s five-watt, single-ended STR-Tremolo lurks behind one of Michael’s test guitars

go into flowers and milk. Anyway, after about seven years of lessons, five of them complaining, I started improvising and writing my own stuff that didn’t much resemble what my earnest teacher had in mind. I loved creating melodies, but the piano felt too immobile. Bottom line, you can’t bring the piano onto your bed at 1AM while listening to the radio.”

At the age of 15, Swart began his guitar obsession proper, in the same place it began for many of us in that era: with a cheap import acquired with odd-job money.

“I’m talking Japanese knockoff of a red Gibson ES-335 purchased in the North Carolina state-school band room after parting with a hard-earned $65,” says Swart. “My parents were not amused, even after I told them it was only $30. Old mom and dad were seeing their piano-playing-son’s dreams go up in six-string flames. I will never forget that first guitar and it’s a rather prized possession which still sits in my studio in all its high-school jazz-band splendour.”

When time came to amp up the offshore semi, Swart’s other early obsession was primed to serve him well. From an even younger age, he had pursued a hobby in electronics, building crystal radio sets from the age of eight and dodging his parents’ cries of: “What in the name of…? You’ll burn the house down!”

THE MAGICAL SILVERTONE

“My very first exposure to tubes,” Michael recalls, “was an old Sears Silvertone console that played LPs [for a time, much of Sears’ entire electronics range carried the Silvertone name]. This big monster was the focal point in the Swart household. I remember crawling behind the console looking at those magical glowing tubes; they were totally fascinating to me.”

The aspiring guitarist’s first real tube-guitar amp came with its own guitar right inside the box: an old Silvertone 1448 guitar and amp-in-case combo, secured from the local pawn shop. The amp portion of the set was missing a tube and the power cable had been cut from it, but the guitar itself was initially enough to cause some excitement.

“A few artists that I really liked played them at the time,” says Swart. “Dexter Romweber of The Flat Duo Jets and Rick Miller of Southern Culture On The Skids.”

Getting the amp running delivered the one-day amp maker his first real ‘win’ in that department; a tube pilfered from his mother’s short-wave radio and an AC cord and plug hijacked from her cake mixer, and the amp-in-case was ready to ride again.

“After that, the amp came to life with that unmistakable tube warmth, that somewhat loose-but-soulful tone that put my lowly solid-state amp to shame as a two-dimensional play toy. It’s another prized possession that’s still in my shop. I still fire it up, and it’s been on some client recordings.”

Shortly after the experience of bringing the Silvertone 1448 back to life, Swart stepped up to an A-list amp in the form of an Ampeg Reverberocket, as well as the big-ticket repair costs that came along for the ride after deciding he should have it serviced by a pro. From there on out, he’d do the work himself: “It’s just that simple a start… I never let another person touch a tube amp of mine from that very day on.”

As such, the future entrepreneur was entirely self-taught in the realm of amp circuits and valve electronics. Taking degrees in computer engineering and math at the University of North Carolina in Wilmington did help with problem solving, troubleshooting and honing in on the best solutions in real-world engineering situations, but Swart’s guitar-amp ethos would be formed more by the dozens of old valve radio and hi-fi consoles he salvaged from the roadsides and yard sales over the years, and turned into fully functional guitar amps.

COOL, MAN! CAN YOU BUILD ME ONE?

When Swart transitioned from reworking existing vintage valve gear to creating his own amps from scratch, the salvage aspect remained a big part of it.

By now, he'd developed an appreciated for vintage transformers and their contribution to the tone and was also indulging his predilection toward the retro styling that any Swart player would instantly recognise today.

"I continued the process of gutting old single-ended and small low-wattage push-pull hi-fi amps and rebuilding them into guitar amps in all sorts of unique enclosures," he tells us. "I would use old suitcases from the 40s, guitar cases, anything that spoke to me. You know, one of the critical learning aspects was working *without* schematics on many of these amps, learning to follow the signal path with attention to results… what worked and didn't work, in the ultimate tone quest.

"I had a small studio above my garage and all these creations began to populate the space. We would have musicians and studio clients come in to play and record and be totally smitten with these one-off designs. I don't know how many times I heard the phrase, 'Cool man! Can you build me one?' That's when the idea first hit; people dug something I *made*!"

The look of these amps became more fully formed when Swart stumbled upon a heavily patina'd old single-ended Supro while at a local flea market. It had a nasty hum, almost zero output, but something about the ancient combo was calling to him.

"I got it home and tinkered with the circuit, making a few changes with parts and wiring and got it sounding amazing. In short, the amp now just blew me away. Okay… I wanted to make something with this soul, this vibe, but my own take.

"My uncle was into woodworking and he agreed to make me a cab of my design. I really loved the tone of pine, so that's what we used. It's hard to beat the warmth of pine. His little cab was awesome, just amazing work with dovetail joints. I was trying to think of some original take, when I hit upon actually covering the amp with funky fabric from this local old-school fabric shop. Each amp would be a different fabric, sort of a virtual one-off and totally unique, from purple polka dots to something that looked like it could walk into a 60s bar."

To get the venture up and running, Swart enlisted the help of Kelly Holsten, an old friend, fellow musician and writer whom he'd met at the college radio station. Holsten had been doing web work and was deep into tube audio gear; he presented the notion of selling Swart's amps on eBay, and set up an elaborate sales page to get the job done. The first single-ended Swart combo sold within a week and the next in just a matter of days.

"I think I built six more amps, each selling in under a week," Swart recalls, "as fast as we could list them. I believe having a cabinet design that was not your typical Fender, Vox or Marshall set us apart from the rest of the builders at the time; this, combined with less-is-more, well-crafted circuits that pointed towards tonal purity over complexity. Another difference? You could *see* the tubes! They were not hidden away."

ATOMIC SPACE TONE

With some sales success under his belt, Swart's vision turned more toward an amp to fulfil his own needs, but the venture would result in his best known and most popular model to date.

"I started wanting to design an amp that I could use for gigs that had reverb and tremolo built in," he recalls. "I felt most of the boutique guys at the time did not have a killer circuit with great reverb *and* tremolo, likely because they thought it might add unnecessary complexity.

"I understood the reasoning, but I wanted to make an amp that sounded amazing with the options I

BELOW Swart's Night Light Jr attenuator is designed for any 4-8 ohm amp that is 15 watts or less

BELOW BOTTOM A Swart-designed LED footswitch for use with the company's amp range

“WITH CAREFUL SELECTION OF THE BEST OF THE OLDER COMPONENT TYPES MIXED WITH THE NEW, YOU CAN GET A GREAT RESULT THAT IS RELIABLE AND PROBLEM-FREE”

ABOVE Michael Swart, founder and head of North Carolina’s Swart Amplification

wanted built in, while retaining the simplicity of the circuit. Most of the designs that I found used more than one tube to get reverb alone. It took some inspiration from Ampeg and this old Gibson Skylark I found, employing only three preamp tubes and the usual two push-pull power tubes to get both reverb and tremolo.

“It sounded ‘okay’, so I knew this was at least possible. So, I made it my task to get three preamp tubes to bring great reverb and tremolo in a cool package. After a number of months, the Atomic Space Tone was born.”

Through the course of wending his way toward the circuits that would populate his creations – partly gleaning inspiration from vintage classics and old valve-audio gear, and partly divining his own trial-and-error route toward superior tone – Swart developed both a discernible ‘house style’ and an innate feeling for what works in his builds.

Part of the thing is natural output-valve breakup, rather than preamp-valve-generated sizzle. Another is found in the simplicity of the circuit and the veracity of the components. “We shoot for the best of what a totally hand-wired, all-tube circuit should be,” says Swart, “with zero transistors and point-to-point turret-board wiring. We are big believers in tube rectification, too. It’s been 15 years and I’ve still yet to make a single solid-state-rectified amplifier. Not to say they can’t be done well, but there is something about tube rectification that is part of what defines our take and what we prefer sonically.

“We’ve always been about less-is-more,” he adds, “keeping the circuit as simple as possible, avoiding extra traces of wire, keeping a short signal path. You’ll not notice our amps laden with tonnes of controls, either. We usually prefer a simple tone cut vs tonnes of EQ knobs. With careful selection of the best of the older component types mixed with the new, you can get a great result that is reliable and problem-free.”

TEARING UP THE RULES

Quizzed about which components and build techniques are most essential to the Swart sound, the maker declares, simply, “It *all* matters! It’s just some differences are small and hard to ascertain. The art is in honing in on these very differences, deducing what is the cause. There are so many variables, including your own perception and bias. Cabinets, speakers, transformers, on down to the resistors and capacitors – all make a noticeable difference when it comes to making something stand out from the masses.

“And finding the right combination of parts is not always easy,” Swart adds. “There’s a tonne of trial and error. The heart of every tube amplifier might just be the transformer, but you can break rules within any of these old saws and sometimes be surprised with the result. Sometimes a smaller transformer is better, depending on your quest. You have to open your mind up and wipe out preconceived notions at times. Don’t be afraid of tearing up the rules.”

And what’s in the pipeline for the amp maker at the moment? As it happens, an indulgence of his love of golden-age recording gear that’s both out of the realm of amplification, yet entirely related to it.

“I wanted to make my own, custom, proprietary take on a ribbon microphone,” Swart reveals. “I wanted it to be affordable, something our customers who had fallen with love with the amps could use to mic our stuff, something that would add to that recording of the Swart experience.

“I still have my studio and use so many types of mics, but have become enamoured with ribbon mics. And I wanted to see if I could make one from scratch, all the way down to the hand-wound transformer. These mics were just so cool and I’m really excited about this thing. I’ve already used the prototype in recording and it’s killer. We hope to have it available to the public this fall.” G

Find out more about Michael Swart’s creations at swartamps.com

Guitarist CHOICE

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THE RUNDOWN

BOUTIQUE EFFECTS BRANDS TO WATCH

WORDS JOSH GARDNER

You can't move for high-end boutique effects pedals in 2019, but some stand out from the crowd – here's our pick of the most interesting brands vying for your bucks

1 QUIET THEORY SOUNDWORKS
QUIETTHEORY.COM

The brainchild of Bryan Laurenson, one-time guitarist in emo-rockers Copeland, Quiet Theory has earned rave reviews for its one and only pedal so far, the lush, ambient Prelude delay and reverb. Created in collaboration with post-rock titans This Will Destroy You, the Prelude's ability to create stunning soundscapes with just a few intuitive knobs – as opposed to the Cape Canaveral-esque layouts of many high-end delay and reverb pedals – marks Laurenson out as a builder who implicitly understands how to create powerful but user-friendly pedals.

2 BEETRONICS
BEETRONICSFX.COM

Filipe Pampuri clearly really likes bees. He also really likes dirt pedals. Beetronics, then, is a perfect blending of the Brazillian's two passions. For the last few years, Filipe has been crafting truly beautiful apid-inspired stompboxes that not only look unique, but sound like nothing else, too. His latest pedal, the Swarm, is a truly remarkable fuzz-and-harmoniser combo that was one of the most fun and inventive things we saw at Winter NAMM 2019.

3 1981 INVENTIONS
1981INVENTIONS.COM

If you follow a lot of guitar players on Instagram, you'll probably recognise the elegantly simple design of the DRV, the one and only pedal currently produced by Matthew Hoopes. While hype around the pedal has been stoked by such clever marketing gimmicks as limited-number drops and one-off colourways, the DRV wouldn't have set the internet aflame if the pedal inside wasn't something special. Effectively a boutique RAT with all of the tone-sucking and harshness taken out, the DRV is a pedal that sounds as good as it looks.

4 SPACEMAN EFFECTS
SPACEMANEFFECTS.COM

Oregon-based company Spaceman Effects has spent a few years creating excellent-sounding hand-built pedals of various flavours, but the pedal that's really marked the company out as one to watch is the Mission Control. The pedal uses a VCA controller and a built-in effects loop to fade in an effected version of any pedal, creating truly unique pulses and swells as you play. It's a pedal that isn't really like anything else and marks Spaceman out as a truly inventive company.

BONDI EFFECTS
BONDIEFFECTS.COM

5 Making one must-try effects pedal is impressive, but two? Jon Ashley of Aussie company Bondi Effects first struck gold with the Sick As, a supremely versatile overdrive pedal that offers two blendable voices with a powerful EQ stack and 18V operation for extra headroom. Then, he followed that up with something totally different, but just as impressive – the Art Van Delay is a 1800ms all-analogue BBD delay, that also offers MIDI control and preset storage. One of the most interesting circuit designers around today.

NANOLOG AUDIO INC
NANOLOGAUDIO.COM

6 'Lab coats by day, classic guitar tones by night' is the mantra of the ultra-boffins at Canadian effects brand Nanolog. Created by actual scientists, Nanolog's impressive drive pedals ditch the silicon and germanium shooting match in favour of 'quantum tunnelling' and 'molecular electronics'. In truth, we're not sure we could explain the science if we tried, but in effect, the company is using nanotechnology to subvert 50 years of distortion-pedal circuitry in the quest for better tone. What more do you need?

TSAKALIS AUDIOWORKS
TSAKALISAUDIOWORKS.COM

7 Greek effects brand Tsakalis AudioWorks has been making decent boutique pedals for a few years now, but the company's Six BOD, which launched at the start of 2019, marks them out as a brand to watch if you're after variety and versatility. That's because the Six isn't just a single overdrive: it offers three of the most iconic drives ever in one enclosure – the King Of Tone, the Timmy and the Bluesbreaker. If Tsakalis can repeat this feat with other classic circuits, all our boards could be about to get a lot smaller…

RYRA
THEKLONEPEDAL.COM

8 Rock Your Repaired Amp is the brainchild of self-confessed perfectionist Shane Logan and you're probably familiar with RYRA thanks to the company's sensational Klone pedal – perhaps the most authentic-sounding and impressive take on the Klon Centaur to date. Shane claims the quality of RYRA's pedals is a result of his no-compromise approach to build quality and component selection, but he's clearly a bit of a wizard, too, as his expansions into other classic overdrive and fuzz circuits can attest.

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Los Angeles

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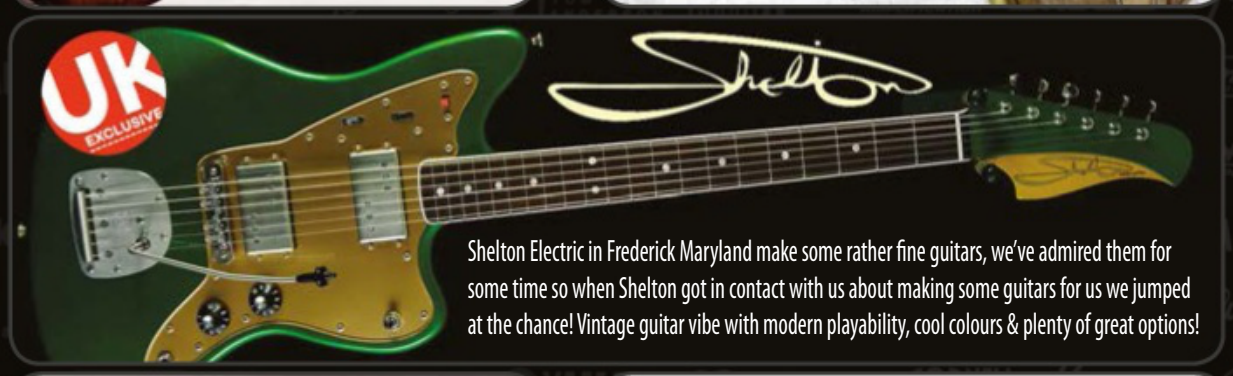

Shelton

Shelton Electric in Frederick Maryland make some rather fine guitars, we've admired them for some time so when Shelton got in contact with us about making some guitars for us we jumped at the chance! Vintage guitar vibe with modern playability, cool colours & plenty of great options!

Swart AMPLIFIER COMPANY

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REVIEWS

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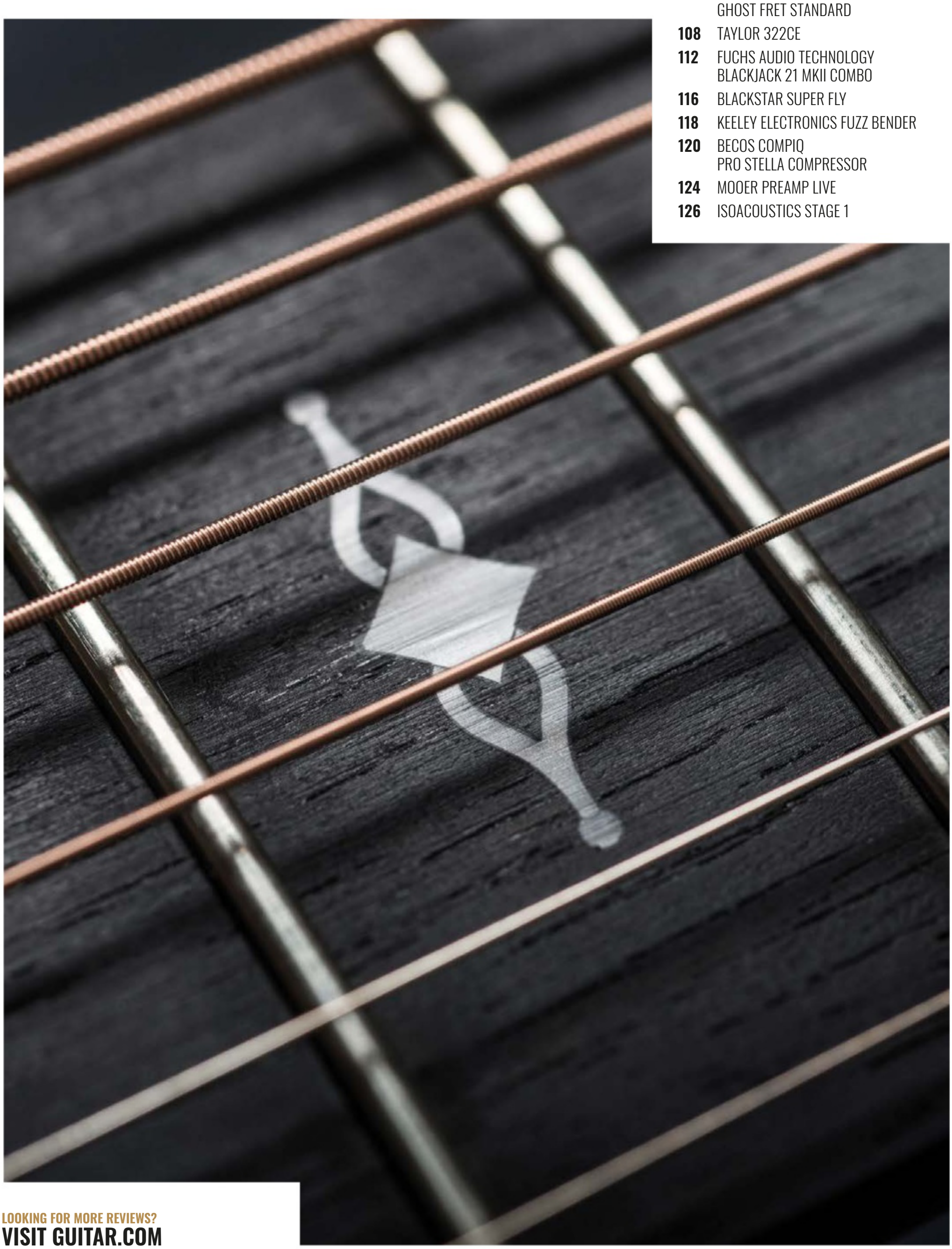

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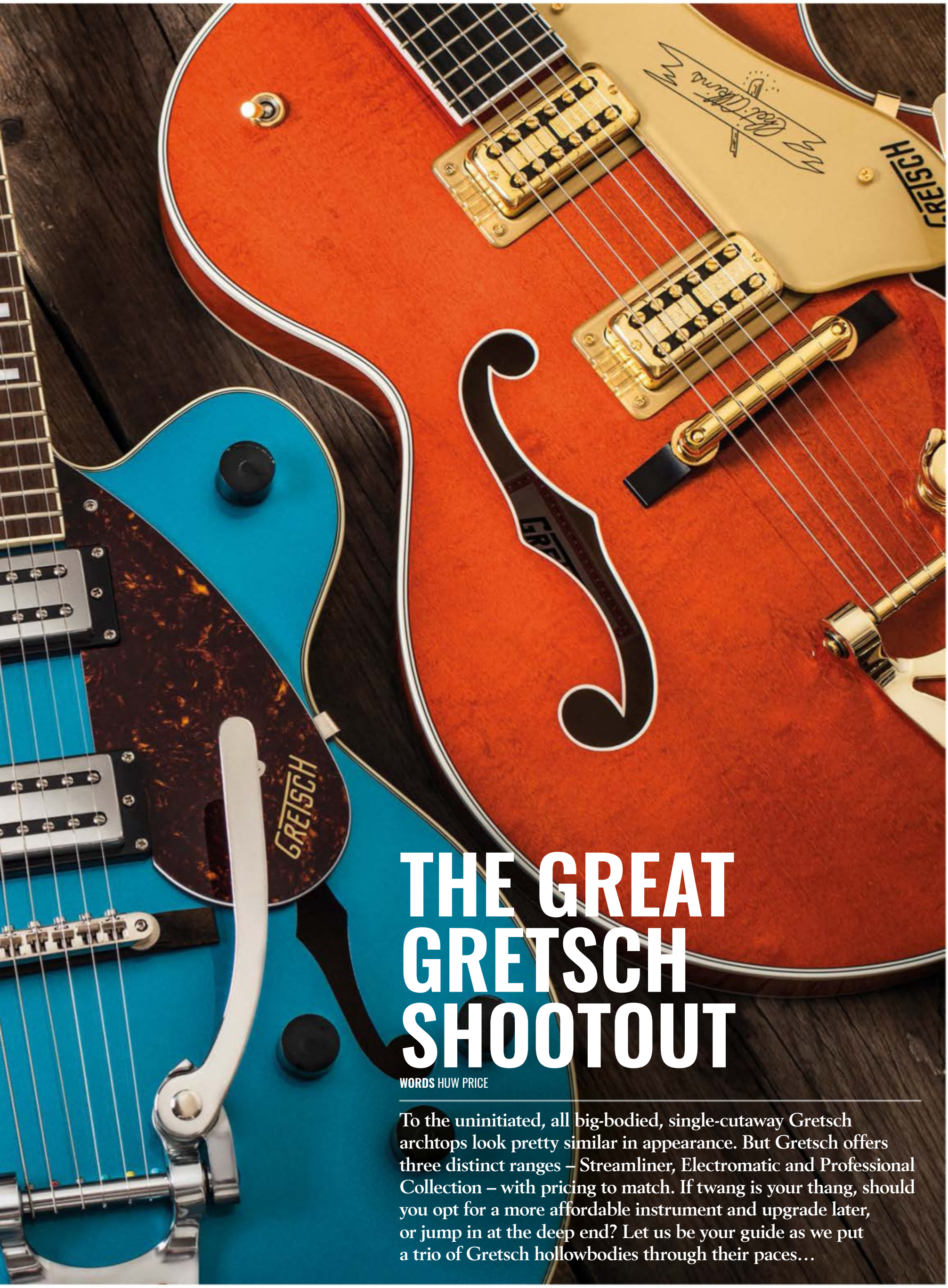


THE GREAT GRETSCH SHOOTOUT

WORDS HUW PRICE

To the uninitiated, all big-bodied, single-cutaway Gretsch archtops look pretty similar in appearance. But Gretsch offers three distinct ranges – Streamliner, Electromatic and Professional Collection – with pricing to match. If twang is your thang, should you opt for a more affordable instrument and upgrade later, or jump in at the deep end? Let us be your guide as we put a trio of Gretsch hollowbodies through their paces…

Gretsch's historic home was in Brooklyn, New York but it has long-since left NYC and like most large-volume guitar manufacturers, the company now has production facilities all over the world. Streamliner models are made in Indonesia, Electromatics in Korea and the high-end models are built in the Terada factory in Japan. At the very top of the tree are the mouthwatering Masterbuilt Custom Shop models made by Stephen Stern and his team in Corona, California.

When it comes to getting the best twang for your buck, it's not necessarily about spending as much cash as you can. Modifications and hot-rodding have been part of Gretsch culture for years: the Electromatic models – and more recently the Streamliners – are popular platforms for upgrades.

To help find the right Gretsch hollowbody for you, we've chosen three similarly spec'd production guitars to put under the microscope. The affordable end of the catalogue is represented here by a Rivera Blue G2420T Streamliner (£485).

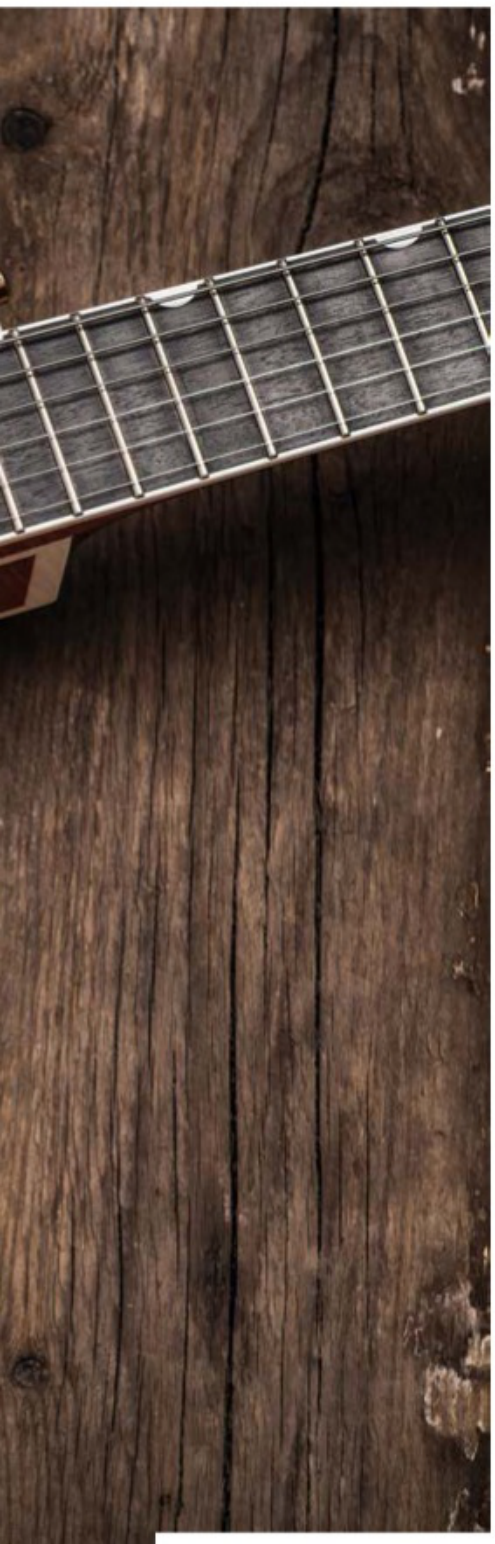
Next up is a G5420T (£989), from the Electromatic Series, with an iconic Orange Stain finish and chrome-plated hardware. Finally, we make the substantial leap to the G6120T Players Edition Nashville (£2,609), with its mellower orange finish and gold-plated hardware.

SERIES SPECIFICS

Although all three lines have been around for a while, there have been some recent changes. The Streamliner series was launched in 2016 and upgraded at the beginning of 2019. A new range of colours was introduced, along with aged multi-ply binding, tortoiseshell pickguards, hump block inlays for the hollow bodies and larger f-holes.

The original Tim Shaw designed Broad'Tron pickups have been updated to create the Broad'Tron BT-2S, with reconfigured windings to improve clarity while increasing output and punch. Early-50s-style clear plastic knobs are fitted, along with Grover-style die-cast tuners.

The Electromatic name has deep roots in Gretsch history, but has been used as a series designation since 2004. The current iteration was launched during the summer of 2016, with a sleeker look and the Electromatic logo moved from the headstock to the pickguard. The headstock was changed to the smaller, late-50s outline, with aged binding added. Our review model has chrome hardware and open-geared tuners.



KEY FEATURES

G6120T PLAYERS EDITION NASHVILLE
DESCRIPTION Hollowbody archtop electric guitar. Made in Japan
PRICE £2,609 (inc. hard case)
BUILD Laminated 57mm maple body with trestle bracing, maple set neck with medium U profile, 12" radius rosewood fingerboard with pearloid Neo-Classic thumbnail inlays and 22 frets
HARDWARE V-Cut B6GP String-Thru Bigsby, Rocking Bar bridge, Gotoh locking tuners, G-Arrow knobs
ELECTRONICS 2x High Sensitive Filter'Tron humbucking pickups, master volume, master tone, individual pickup volume controls, 3-way selector switch
SCALE LENGTH 625mm/24.6"
NECK WIDTH 43.1mm at nut, 52.9mm at 12th fret
NECK DEPTH 19mm at first fret, 22mm at 9th fret
STRING SPACING 35.2mm at nut, 52.8mm at bridge
WEIGHT 3.35kg/7.38lb
LEFT HANDERS Yes
FINISHES Orange Stain

8/10 **A well-considered update on a classic-era 6120, with tone tweaks and prudent hardware changes**

The pickup rings are now vintage-style moulded surrounds, but the Black Top Filter'Tron pickups are suspended from the rings like Gibson humbuckers and there are two screws on the bass side to adjust the angle relative to the strings as well as pickup height. Gretsch also added thumbnail inlays, a treble bleed on the master volume and a bridge that's secured by drilling two small holes into the top that accommodate the bridge posts protruding from the base of the bridge.

In 2016, Gretsch began organising the Professional Collection into three categories – Vintage Select reissues, Players Edition models with modern featuresets, and the Signature Series. The tagline for the High Sensitive Filter'Tron-equipped Players Edition line-up is "Every Song, Every Night", with the aim of providing a stable, gig-friendly instrument straight out of the box (something that couldn't always be claimed of Gretsches of old).

Player-oriented features include a pinned bridge, locking tuners, a Graph Tech Tusq XL nut, medium-jumbo frets, shallower bodies, a dressed-away heel shape, no-load tone control, a treble-bleed circuit on the master volume and String-Thru Bigsbys.

This is enticing news for anybody who has struggled to keep their ball ends latched onto Bigsby pins when they're re-stringing [ie, everybody except for octopi – Ed]. Pinless Bigsbys allow you to thread strings straight through the roller bar and top wrap – much like a Gibson-style wrapover bridge.

KEY FEATURES

G5420T ELECTROMATIC
DESCRIPTION Hollowbody archtop electric guitar. Made in Korea
PRICE £989
BUILD Laminated 70mm maple body with sound post, maple set neck with 'Standard U' profile, 12" radius rosewood fingerboard with pearloid thumbnail inlays and 22 frets
HARDWARE Licensed Bigsby B60, Adjusto-Matic bridge, open-back tuners, G-Arrow knobs
ELECTRONICS 2x Blacktop Filter'Tron humbucking pickups, master volume, master tone, individual pickup volume controls, 3-way selector switch
SCALE LENGTH 625mm/24.6"
NECK WIDTH 42.9mm at nut, 53.4mmat 12th fret
NECK DEPTH 20mm at first fret, 21mm at 9th fret
STRING SPACING 34.5mm at nut, 51.5mm at bridge
WEIGHT 3.25kg/7.16lb
LEFT HANDERS Yes (no Bigsby)
FINISHES Orange Stain (as reviewed), Fairline Blue, Aspen Green, Candy Apple Red

9/10 **Vintage style, impressive pickups and tremendous upgrade potential – this is the bargain of the bunch**

BUILD AND HARDWARE

All three guitars here have the same control layout, with a master volume, individual volume controls, a master tone control and a three-way pickup-selector switch. The bodies are maple ply, but the Players Edition is 13mm thinner than the others.

The fingerboards are different too, moving from laurel, to rosewood and finally ebony as prices increase. The Adjusto-Matic bridges on the cheaper models may seem more sophisticated, but the Players Edition bar bridge offers superior tone and we experience no intonation issues.

Despite the similarities in the materials used to build all three guitars, there are significant differences in the way they're assembled and a quick glimpse through the various f-holes reveals all.

The Streamliner is a bona-fide archtop, with two braces glued to the underside of the top. The Electromatic and Players Edition are constructed in much the same way, but the Electromatic has a substantial post beneath the bridge area that couples the front and back of its body.

The Players Edition has 50s-era 'trestle bracing' – two elongated and inverted 'U' shaped pieces of spruce that are glued to the underside of the top braces. This also couples the front and back, but here, there are four contact points – two in the vicinity of the bridge and two close to the neck block.

All three of these models' necks are different. The Streamliner's is the chunkiest, with a deep 'U'

shape. The Electromatic's is a touch slimmer, but still has that flat-shouldered 'U' shape, while the Players Edition is the slimmest and most refined of the lot, with softened shoulders and a playing feel not dissimilar to the great Gretsch necks of the 1960s.

SOUNDS

Given the similarity in materials and dimensions, the acoustic differences here are unexpectedly profound. If we were assessing the sonic qualities of these guitars from a purely acoustic perspective, the Streamliner might be the winner. By some distance, it's the loudest, brightest and deepest of the group. There's a percussive attack, plenty of harmonic content and a frequency range that the Electromatic and Players Edition can't match.

The trade-off is that it's very much an old-school archtop tone, with little sustain. Although the Electromatic has a narrower frequency range and more subdued dynamics, the response is far more even, better balanced and it sustains for longer. Effectively, it sounds more like an unplugged semi-solid electric. The Players Edition is the quietest acoustically, but has the best sustain and makes us imagine an ES-335 with a double-depth body.

For reference, we compare all three review guitars with our trestle-braced 1960 Anniversary/6120 conversion. Unsurprisingly, the Players Edition sounds closest to the vintage instrument, but the Electromatic runs it close for sustain and has a more vibrant acoustic response.

In most instances, unplugged tone provides some indication of what to expect when you plug in, but in this instance, there are some surprises. It turns out that the Streamliner has far more amplified sustain than expected and the Players Edition is a little hit and miss, depending on which area of the neck you're playing. The Electromatic has the most even response all along the fretboard.

Filter'Trons are pernickety things and need careful adjustment to get them performing at their best. This has clearly been carried out before the Players Edition model left the factory, but the same cannot be said for the Electromatic. This is important to note if you try one in a shop, because the neck pickup is over 10mm away from the strings and the fillister-head polepiece screws are all screwed down tight.

Raising the screws and the coils closer to the strings transforms the guitar and closes the gap significantly with the Players Edition's pickups. Again, we use the vintage Filter'Trons in our 6120 conversion as a sonic reference and the Blacktop Filter'Trons sound far closer to vintage pickups than the High Sensitive Filter'Trons in the Players Edition guitar.

Granted, vintage doesn't necessarily mean superior, but if you appreciate the sweet but squeaky treble, midrange quack and jazzy but clear roundness of Brian Setzer's tone, the Blacktops are the ones to go for. That said, the High Sensitives sound clearer, brighter and provide more bite and cut. It's a contemporary take on classic Gretsch tone that scythes effortlessly through stompbox chains and high-gain amps.

The Broad'Tron BT-2S units in the Streamliner certainly have a passing resemblance to Filter'Trons – especially on the bridge and middle settings, with their diffused midrange scoop. They're like a grainier, louder and slightly brasher variation, but we find the neck pickup a bit thick and lacking in clarity. This is an enjoyable and thoroughly usable guitar, but we're not entirely convinced that the BT-2S is a big improvement on the original 2016 Tim Shaw designed Broad'Trons.

WHICH SHOULD I BUY?

There's no denying that the Streamliner is great value for money and a wonderful entrée into Gretsch culture. We love the colour options and there is upgrade potential – if you're so inclined. More authentic Filter'Tron replicas are available in full-size humbucker dimensions and if the plastic parts bother you, changing to Gretsch metal knobs and a metal switch tip is both easy and affordable.

KEY FEATURES

G2420T STREAMLINER
DESCRIPTION Hollowbody archtop electric guitar. Made in Indonesia
PRICE £485
BUILD Laminated maple 70mm body with parallel bracing, nato set neck with medium U profile, 12" radius laurel fingerboard with pearloid humpblock inlays and 22 frets
HARDWARE Licensed B60 Bigsby, Adjusto-Matic bridge, diecast tuners, 3-ply tortoiseshell guard
ELECTRONICS 2x Broad'Tron BT-2S humbucking pickups, master volume, master tone, individual pickup volume controls, 3-way selector switch
SCALE LENGTH 628 mm/24.75"
NECK WIDTH 42.6mm at nut, 53.8mm at 12th fret
NECK DEPTH 21mm at first fret, 22mm at 9th fret
STRING SPACING 34.6mm at nut, 51.6mm at bridge
WEIGHT 3kg/6.6lb
LEFT HANDERS No
FINISHES Riviera Blue (as reviewed), Candy Apple Red, Golddust
CONTACT gretschguitars.com

7/10 **High build quality and lots of fun, but lacks vintage Gretsch character and is prone to feedback**

The Electromatic has upgrade potential, too, but with thumbnail markers, full-sized bound f-holes and metal hardware already installed, you're starting from a much higher level. We would be inclined to go for a bar bridge from the likes of Tru-Arc or Compton, and might consider a V-cut Bigsby and aftermarket pickguard to complete the look, too. As for the pickups, while we think that traditional Filter'Tron covers would enhance the look, we'd be in no hurry to swap out the Blacktops.

The Players Edition has superior build and finish quality and it's the most highly equipped, but you're being asked to pay a significant premium. You do get 50s-style trestle braces, and retrofitting those to a Streamliner or Electromatic isn't a viable option. Fortunately, the Electromatic's bridge post performs much the same function, so it's not a deal breaker.

Gretsch is currently offering fine guitars at every price point. If you want the best and you have the budget, the Players Edition won't disappoint.

At the other end of the spectrum, the Streamliner may prove to be the Gretsch equivalent of a gateway drug, opening your ears and mind to an inspirational new world. But for tone, upgradability, customisation potential and sheer value, we'd be inclined to go for an Electromatic. G

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

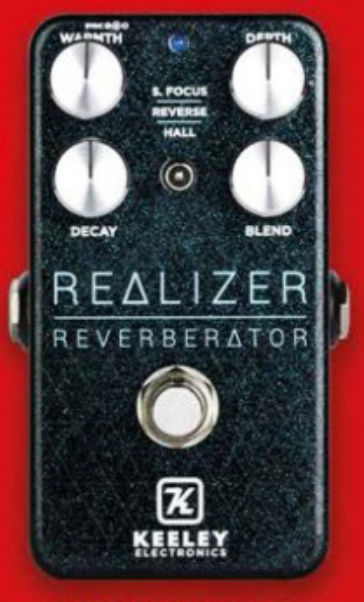
Ibanez AFS75T-MGF **£537**, Guild Starfire III w/Bigsby **£936**, Duesenberg Starplayer TV Deluxe **£2,053**

SYNTH-1

REVERSE ATTACK FUZZ WAVE GENERATOR

DDR

DRIVE - DELAY - REVERB



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PATRICK JAMES EGGLE
MACON SINGLE CUT

WORDS CHRIS VINNICOMBE

Guitar EDITOR'S CHOICE

Specially commissioned by British blues guitarist Aynsley Lister, this take on the classic single-cut format comes equipped with a wrapover bridge and an old-school pickup combination…

Our first encounter with Patrick James Eggle's impressive Macon double-cut was back in 2015, and the similarly gorgeous Single Cut version followed two years later.

Available in dual humbucker and P-90 configurations with a solid, chambered or 'semi-chambered' body, this example was built recently for Brit blues star Aynsley Lister and features a couple of twists.

When the Les Paul Custom arrived on the scene in late 1953 – black, "like a tuxedo," just as Les requested – it came equipped with a P-90 at the bridge and a 'staple' pickup in the neck position with alnico bar magnets. This combination was consigned to history when the newfangled PAF arrived in mid 1957, but it has something of a cult following, offering a very different experience to that of a Goldtop fitted with a pair of soapbars.

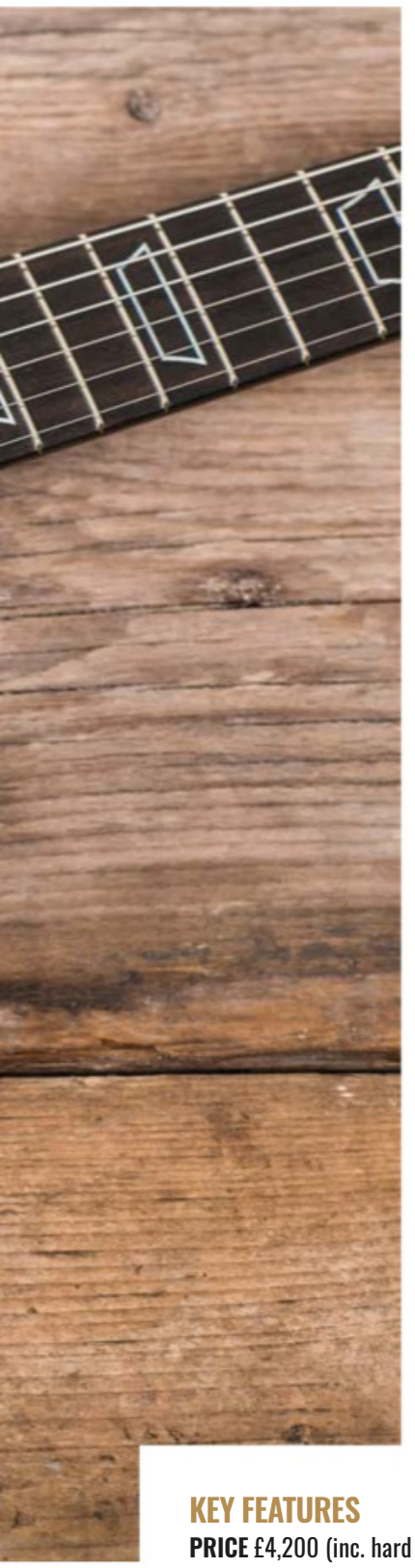
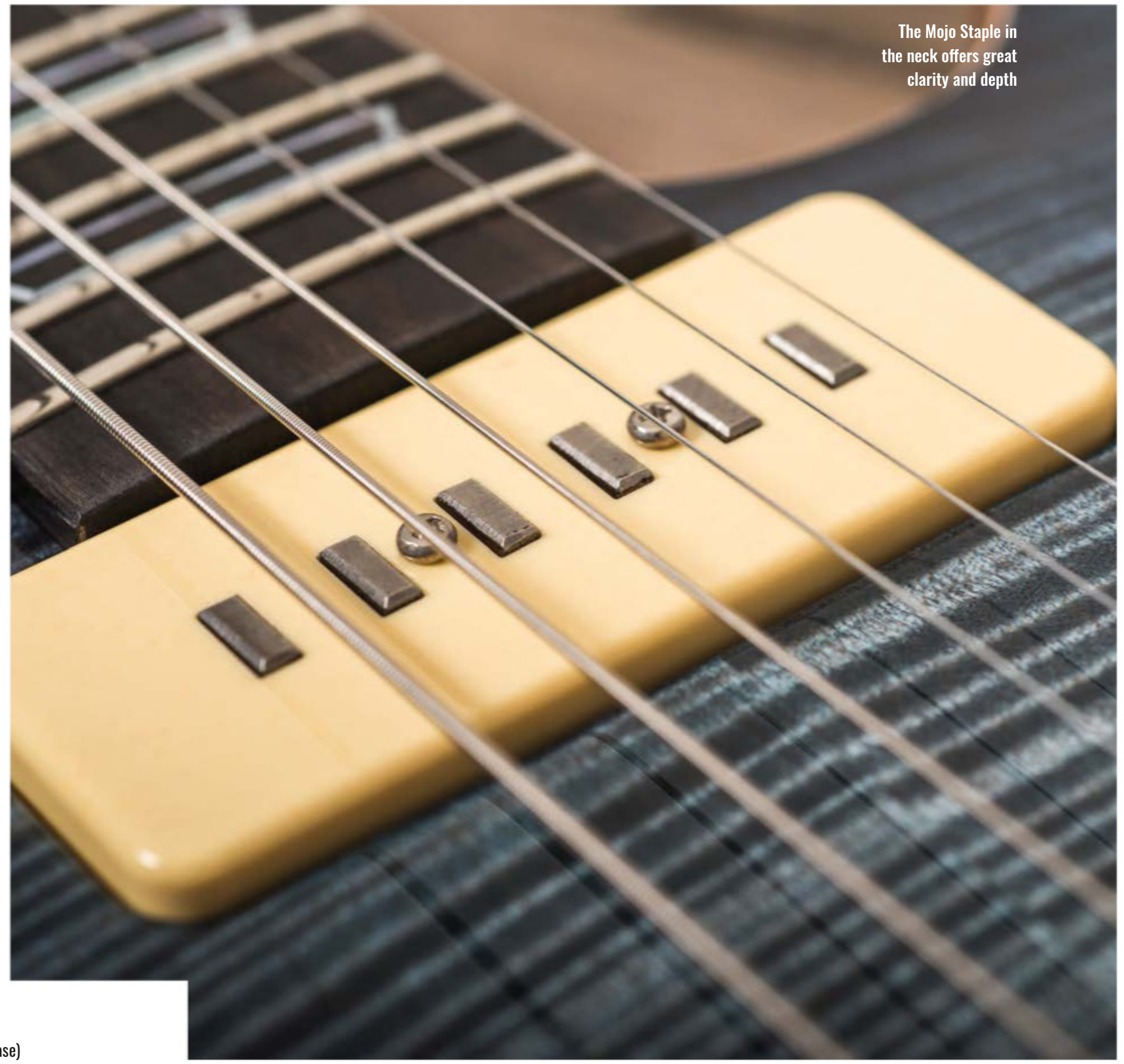
Here in 2019, Aynsley has chosen an early LP Custom-style combination of P-90 and Staple units wound by Mojo Pickups main man Marc Ransley and an aluminium PRS-style wraparound bridge made by ABM in Germany. The tasteful hardware ageing – also seen on the Kluson-style Gotoh SD90 tuners – is done by Eggle's in-house team.

Although the Macon's overall formula doesn't deviate too far from Kalamazoo in the mid 50s, the belly-cut and set 'slipper' neck joint provide graceful concessions to player comfort. Meanwhile, the centre-joined flametop with its gloss nitrocellulose finish and dramatic dish carve is glued to a semi-chambered back that Patrick tells us has around 20 per cent of the mahogany removed (fully chambered being closer to 60 per cent).

The ebony fingerboard's understated frame inlays and unbound edges help balance the impact of that eye-popping top and make for an overall aesthetic with a little luxury, but not too much flash. Aside from the slightly flimsy feel of the gold top-hat knobs, every aspect of this guitar comes straight out of the top drawer and it's beautifully made, with just the right balance of precision and personality.

IN USE

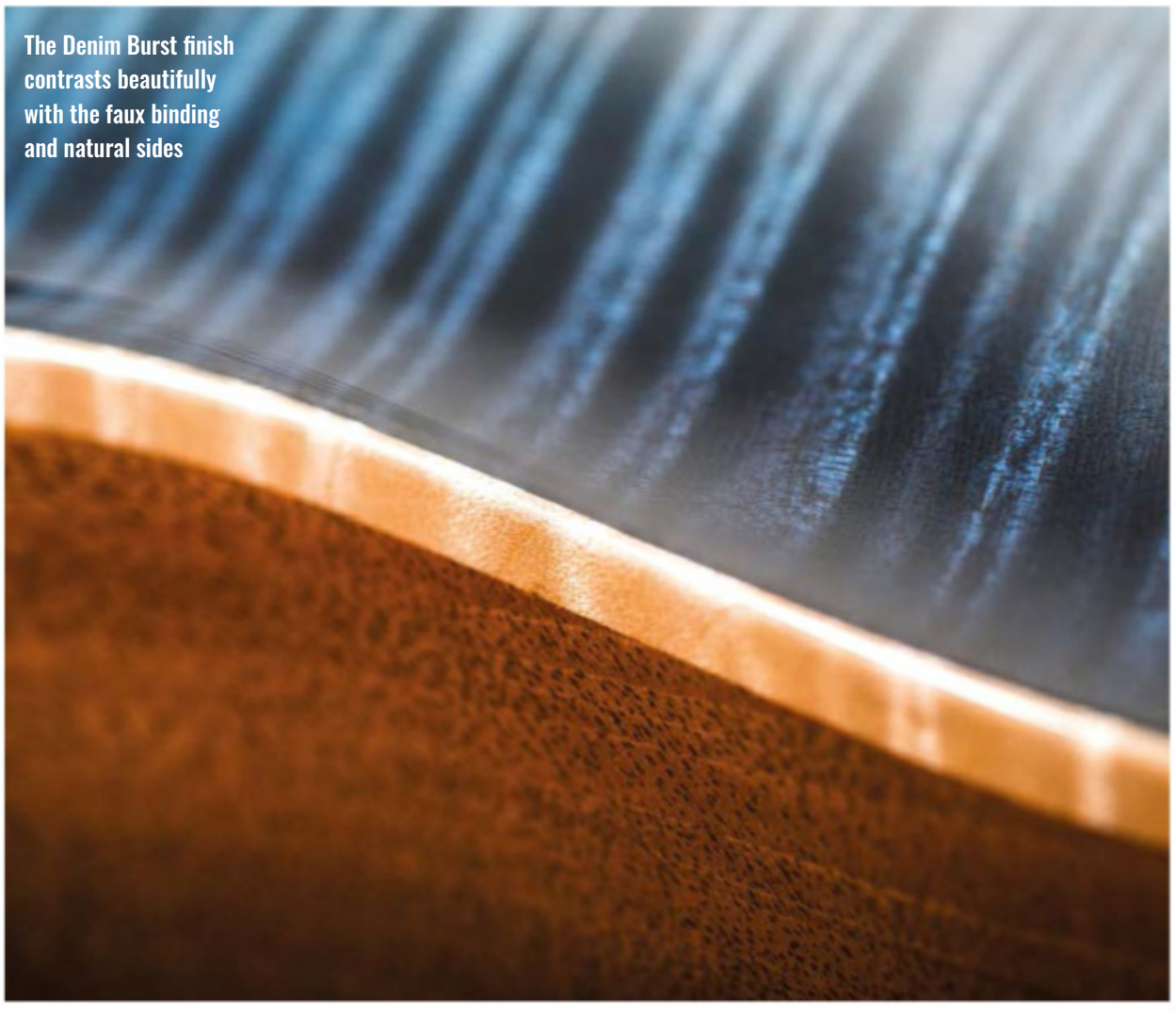
The Macon's shimmering flametop and faux binding may have the vibe of a PRS or Nik Huber, the acoustic playing experience feels closer to the source and is reminiscent of a wrapover Goldtop with a long, shifting note



The Mojo Staple in the neck offers great clarity and depth

KEY FEATURES

PRICE £4,200 (inc. hard case)
DESCRIPTION Single-cutaway electric guitar. Made in UK
BUILD Semi-chambered mahogany back, flame maple top, set mahogany neck with Fat C profile, 12-inch radius ebony fingerboard with 22 Jescar 55090 frets and mother of pearl crown-frame inlays
HARDWARE Aged nickel-plated aluminum ABM bridge and Gotoh SD90 vintage-style tuners
ELECTRONICS Mojo P-90 (bridge) and Staple (neck) pickups, 2x volume with treble bleed, 2x tone, 3-way toggle pickup selector, Emerson Pro 500k pots, NOS Russian paper-in-oil tone caps
SCALE LENGTH 24.625"/625mm
NECK WIDTH 42.8mm at nut, 51.9mm at 12th fret
NECK DEPTH 23.3mm at first fret, 25.5mm at 12th fret
STRING SPACING 35.6mm at nut, 52mm at bridge
WEIGHT 3.3kg/7.3lb
FINISH Denim Burst nitrocellulose (gloss top, hand-burnished back and sides, 'worn through' neck)
CONTACT Patrick James Eggle Guitars eggle.co.uk



The Denim Burst finish contrasts beautifully with the faux binding and natural sides

decay combining with ghostly, piano-like highs and head-to-tail resonance. The partial chambering certainly helps, but there's no lack of mid push either.

Even the Kluson-style Gotoh SD90 tuners are aged by hand

The back of the neck's 'worn through' open-pore finish between the first and 14th frets has an organic but smooth feel reminiscent of one of Eggle's fabulous acoustics, while the 'Fat C' carve is beautifully rounded and will score many points with fans of old Gibsons. Yet when you work your way up to those higher reaches, you'll notice that it's a much softer ride than the traditional LP neck joint.

Many instruments are described as vocal sounding, but plugging the Macon into our Lazy J combo quickly reveals this guitar's vocabulary extends further than most. The bridge P-90 has a raunchy snarl for riffs and chords that soon transforms into a wonderfully expressive blues-rock lead tone that's at once creamy and nasal, with plenty of upper-harmonic interest.

The Mojo Staple pickup is a very different animal – played clean, it's easy to hear the evolutionary link back to the DeArmond Dynasonics that Les Paul stuffed inside P-90 covers on his early Goldtops. There are such clear highs and deep, articulate bass notes that jazz, hybrid-picking and fingerstyle workouts are equally well served.

Wind up the drive and take a Hendrix-y approach and the percussive dynamics of the pickup and the elastic response of the 24.6-inch scale length – even strung with Aynsley's preferred Curt Mangan 0.11s – combine into something resembling a fat and visceral Strat tone. Exhilarating stuff.

What happens in the middle position? We imagine this is where Aynsley will spend a lot of his time, because there's so much light and shade available for blues playing – from sweet to savage and all points in between. The onboard controls are musical and responsive; it's possible to create pseudo-wah effects by rolling the neck pickup's volume in and out of the mix and there's a sweet spot around seven and a half for a quacky, cocked-wah-style lead tone.

Although our time with this instrument merely allows us to scratch the surface (not literally, Aynsley, we promise), it's clear there's a beguiling array of tones on offer. Once again, we find ourselves saluting Eggle's formidable luthiery skills. G

The neck joint aids upper-fret access and player comfort

9/10 **The thrill ride of an old classic with modern boutique production values**

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

PRS McCarty Singlecut 594 **£3,399**, Nik Huber Orca Tiger Eye **£5,195**, Gibson 1954 Les Paul Goldtop Reissue VOS **£3,699**

"Style and substance from a guitar that sounds as good as it looks. 9/10"
Chris Vinnicombe Guitar.com

Guitar.com EDITOR'S CHOICE

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CHAPMAN GUITARS
V2 GHOST FRET STANDARD

WORDS DARRAN CHARLES

Updated for 2019, this angular, rock-ready machine features new pickups and a sharper focus on attention to detail

Celebrating 10 years in existence, Chapman Guitars announced its overhauled Standard line earlier this year. The Standard models are still made in Indonesia, but production has now moved to a different factory and the V2 Standards also sport new pickups made in-house at the same facility.

Chapman says the production change was prompted by a lack of consistency of fit and finish, with a small percentage of instruments not hitting the necessary level of quality. After extensive consultation, including the perusal of many prototypes, a factory change was approved.

The overwhelming majority of original Chapman Standard-line guitars certainly weren't deficient in the quality department, but here, there's a notable improvement in attention to detail and set-up.

The neck join on our model is exemplary and the guitar is immediately perfectly intonated and playable. Even the action is set at a low and comfortable height and with its 13.75-inch 'board radius, there's little danger of any string choking.

The Ghost Fret's inspiration is fairly obvious – and it's the most striking shape in the Chapman range. You'd be forgiven for thinking it a potentially awkward fit but, aided by a substantial ribcage contour, this is a very comfortable guitar to play when seated. Strapped on, however, our review guitar is guilty of a little neck-dive.

IN USE

The maple neck itself is a very comfortable medium 'C' shape with a silky smooth satin finish. With a 24.75-inch scale length and the generous cutaway providing almost unfettered access to the top frets, we explore the higher registers with some brave finger stretches – although no injuries were suffered in the reviewing of this guitar.

Chapman's own-brand pickups now feature on all Standard V2 models and the Primordial Zerø humbuckers in the neck and bridge positions have been voiced in accordance with the Ghost Fret's body shape: bold and impactful.

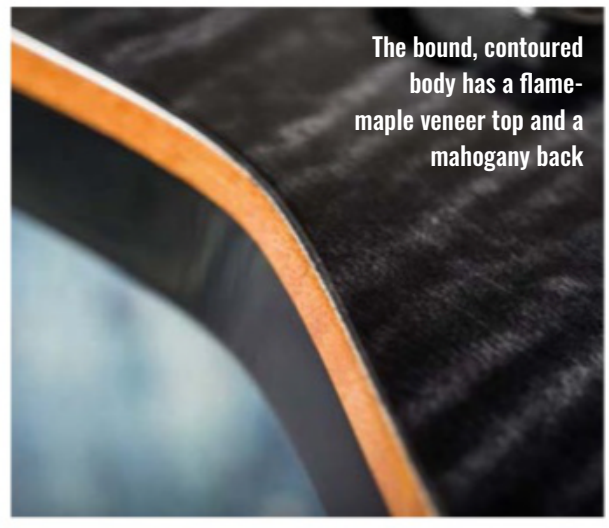
They are not quite as overwound as we expected, but nevertheless, they are very much suited to the higher-gain patches on our Axe-Fx III, namely those based on Marshalls and Mesas. In conjunction with the mahogany/maple construction, a pronounced midrange is evident, but the wonderfully smooth ebony 'board adds a touch of brightness that gives our down-tuned riffage an extra helping of clarity.

The machineheads are Chapman Classic closed 18:1 tuners

KEY FEATURES

PRICE £499
DESCRIPTION 6-string solidbody electric guitar. Made in Indonesia
BUILD Mahogany body with flame-maple veneer, maple set-through neck with ebony 13.75"/350mm radius, Graph Tech Tusq XL nut, 22 jumbo nickel frets
HARDWARE Chapman Classic closed 18:1 tuners, string-through hardtail bridge
ELECTRICS 2x Chapman Primordial Zerø humbuckers, master volume, master tone with push/pull coil split, 3-way toggle pickup selector
SCALE LENGTH 24.75"/629mm
NECK DEPTH 21.8mm at 1st fret, 24.4mm at 12th fret
NECK WIDTH 43.5mm at nut, 52mm at 12th fret
STRING SPACING 53mm at bridge, 36.2mm at nut
WEIGHT 3.9kg/8.6lb
OPTIONS Left-handed version (no extra cost, Midnight Sky finish only)
FINISHES Lunar (as reviewed), Black Blood
CONTACT Chapman Guitars chapmanguitars.co.uk

A typically full-bodied clean tone is the order of the day through our virtual Fender Tweed patch, but the coil-split affords some funky tones that you normally wouldn't expect from such a sharp-cornered, rock-orientated behemoth.



The bound, contoured body has a flame-maple veneer top and a mahogany back

The Ghost Fret – indeed the whole Standard range – is markedly improved and Chapman has earned the right to be on the 'must try' list for those in the market for an affordable, reliable rock guitar.

8/10 **Big tones with power and clarity from this refined rock machine**

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

Epiphone Gothic 1958 Explorer **£379**,
Dean ZX Flame Top **£249**, Schecter E-1 Standard **£729**

The Ghost Fret's neck has a medium 'C' shape, a satin finish and a 24.75-inch scale

TAYLOR 322CE

WORDS MICHAEL WATTS

Guitar EDITOR'S CHOICE

Taylo'rs much-vaunted V-Class bracing makes its presence felt in a smaller package as we check out a Grand Concert cutaway electro featuring an intriguing wood combination…

Taylor's Grand Concert model first hit the scene in 1984 and met with widespread enthusiasm from guitarists who had long desired a clear, modern sound from a smaller, more comfortable body. This shape has been a stalwart of the Taylor range ever since and has straddled every level of build from the humblest wood combinations to the most exotic presentation-grade wonders.

The 300 series is now the first step on the 'Taylor journey' to feature all-solid woods and, while a more established combination of sapele and spruce is also available on the 312, this review instrument comes with back and sides of Tasmanian blackwood and a tropical mahogany soundboard replete with Taylor's V-Class bracing system.

While a mahogany soundboard has been a familiar sight on steel-string guitars since the early 1900s, this is the first example this reviewer has encountered where the back and sides were not also made of the same wood. That said, some players will find reassurance in the fact that this is genuine South American mahogany.

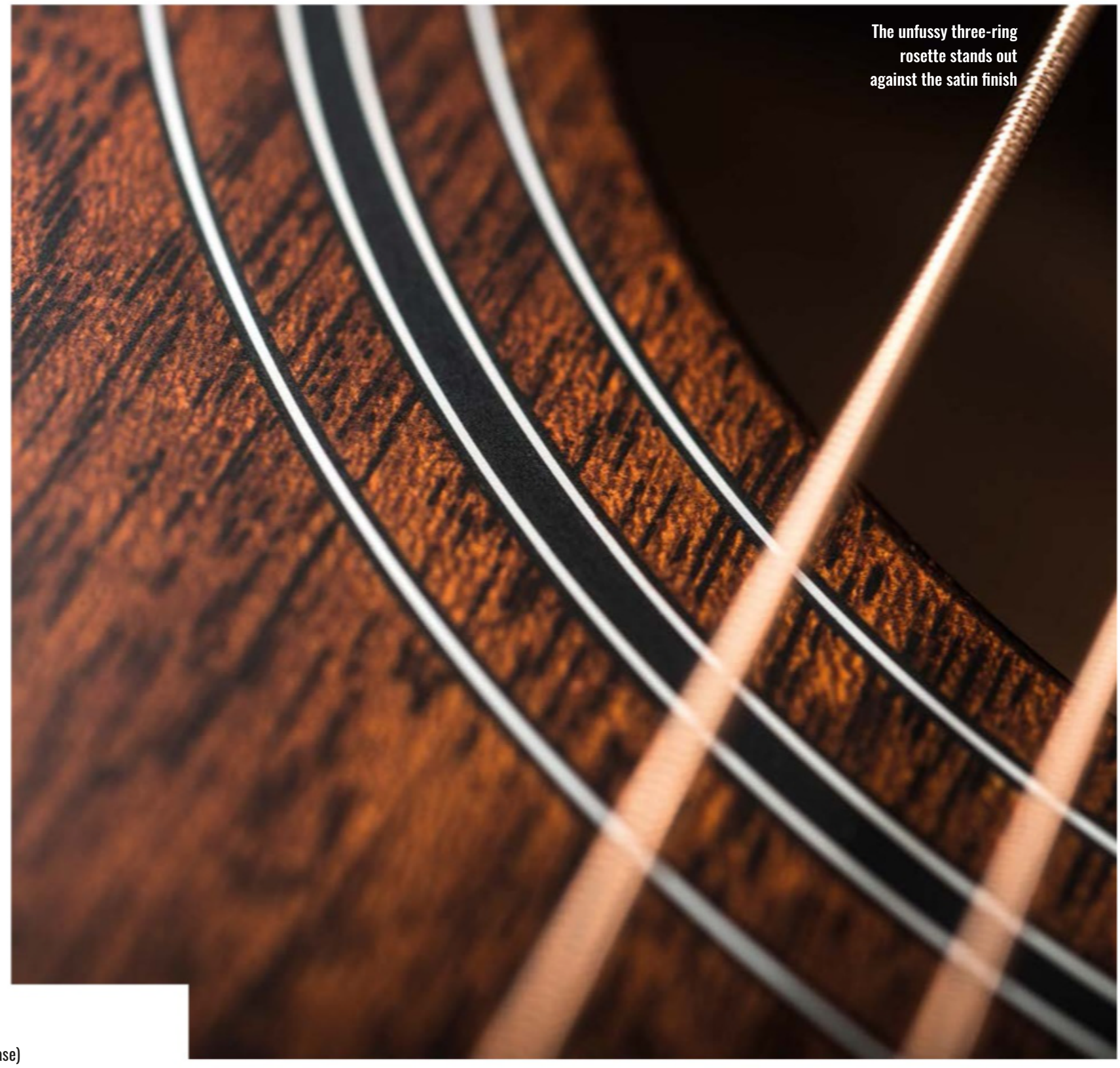
Tasmanian blackwood belongs to the Acacia family, and has garnered a reputation in the bespoke luthiery community as a characterful, lower-cost alternative to another member of that genus, the legendarily beautiful Hawaiian koa.

In the case of this 322ce, there's almost none of the figure that the Acacia family is known for and to the casual observer, this looks like an all-mahogany guitar. In all likelihood, this was a calculated move on the company's behalf, to keep the instrument within a price point.

There}s no doubt that the 322ce is an aesthetically pleasing guitar. We've always had a soft spot for the curves of a Grand Concert and here, the combination of this classic shape, Taylor's elegant take on a Venetian cutaway and the shaded sunburst finish makes for a broodingly elegant instrument that draws your eye towards the headstock, capped as it is, with a beautiful stripe of orange and black ebony. Very tasteful.

IN USE

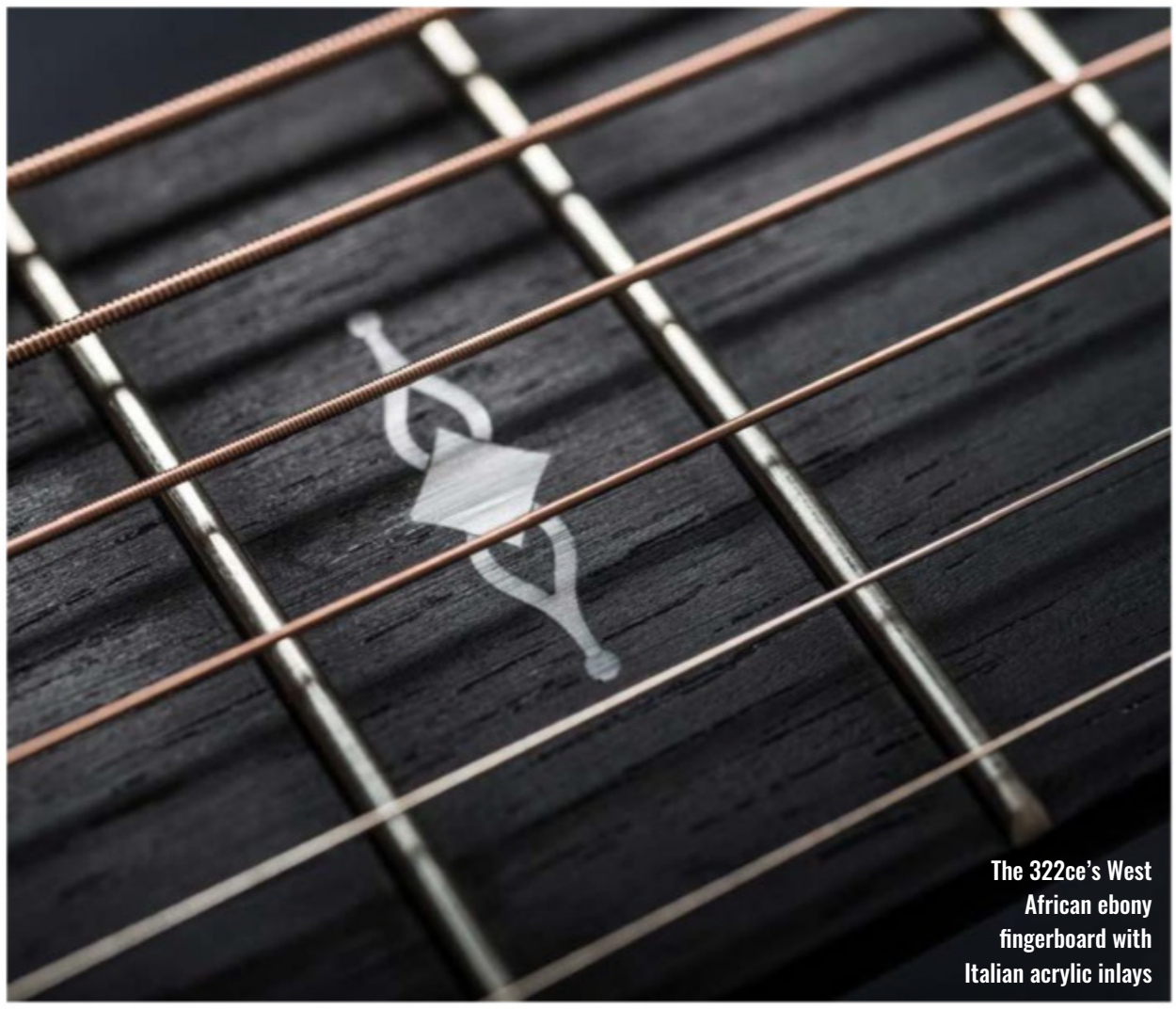
It's easy to imagine that the template for this Taylor's slightly V-shaped neck profile was taken directly from a thumb-over-the-top G chord. It's an immediately comfortable carve for open



The unfussy three-ring rosette stands out against the satin finish

KEY FEATURES

PRICE £2,428 (inc. hard case)
DESCRIPTION All solid wood steel-string acoustic guitar. Made in the USA
BUILD Tropical mahogany top with V-Class bracing, Tasmanian blackwood back and sides, ebony bridge, tropical mahogany neck, West African ebony fingerboard with Italian acrylic inlays, ebony binding, white plastic purfling, satin black sealed tuners, black graphite nut, West African ebony headstock overlay with Italian acrylic inlay, Micarta saddle, ES2 pickup system
SCALE LENGTH 631.825mm/24.875"
NECK WIDTH 44.45mm at nut, 57.15mm at 12th fret
NECK DEPTH 20.7mm at first fret, 25.4mm at 7th fret
STRING SPACING 38mm at nut, 56mm at bridge
WEIGHT 1.8kg/3.9lb
ELECTRICS Taylor Expression System 2 pickup system
LEFT HANDERS Yes (no upcharge)
FINISH Satin Blackwood Stain back/sides, Medium Brown Stain top/neck, Shaded Edge Burst top
CONTACT taylorguitars.com



The 322ce's West African ebony fingerboard with Italian acrylic inlays

and barre chords up and down the neck and feels inviting and familiar. While the 1.75-inch/44.45mm nut width should provide most players with plenty of room

Taylor
1103149071

The headstock's striking stripe of orange and black ebony

for the fretting hand, dedicated fingerstylists might prefer a touch more 'meat' in the first position.

The Grand Concert body fits snugly against the player and the satin finish not only feels comfortable, but also keeps body rubs and extraneous noise to a minimum – a real bonus for the sensitively mic'd recording guitarist.

With the 322ce in standard tuning, we open up its tonal possibilities with some exploratory fingerstyle and are greeted by a warm, friendly voice, albeit one that's slightly subdued. A smaller soundboard often translates into an immediate sense of presence due to the speed of movement. However, in this case, the playing experience is a lot mellower with a gentle sound and balanced timbral spectrum that leans towards the mids while smoothing off the trebles and upper-partial overtones.

The bass register is focused and underpins fingerstyle work effectively, but we are left with the impression that the soundboard might be a little over-built for fingers.

Taylor confirms the spruce and mahogany tops at this end of the range are thicknessed and braced to the same measurements regardless of which wood is used, perhaps something of a missed opportunity.

Things improve dramatically with the application of a plectrum. The soundboard springs into life, revealing a very different character. Mahogany-topped guitars have often found favour in the hands of blues players and while this guitar can certainly snarl and grunt with the best of them, there's more to it than that.

Wide-voice open-string textures and close-harmony jazz chords come through clearly, with an encouraging degree of sustain along the entirety of the fretboard and even past the body join. There's a compressed quality to the strummed attack as you dig in more forcefully and the 'sweet spot' scale length keeps things clear and tight with impressive note separation throughout.

As you might expect, the 322ce really does shine when plugged in. The ES2 pickup system (Taylor's in-house design) proves more than up to the task of providing an expressive amplified voice, with very little tweaking needed. The guitar also proves admirably resistant to feedback, something we ascribe to its smaller size as much as to the V-Class bracing.

It's always tempting to wonder about the thought process behind a particular model. And given that much of the more conventional range of the sonic spectrum will be covered by its spruce and sapele sibling, it's just as tempting to believe that Andy Powers' end goal for the 322ce was to create smooth-voiced instrument that growls when you hit it. If, as we suspect, that is the case, then it's mission accomplished once again! G

8/10 **A characterful instrument that bucks convention in pursuit of tonal goodness**

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

Martin GPCPA4 **£1,849**, Waterloo WL-14X Mahogany **£2,199**, Guild M-20E **£1,599**

FUCHS AUDIO TECHNOLOGY

BLACKJACK 21 MKII COMBO

WORDS HUW PRICE

With a reputation for superior tone, no-frills design and an enviable client list, Andy Fuchs knows a thing or two about high-end tube amplification. Here's a model you don't need to be rock royalty to afford…

At 21 watts, the Blackjack 21 MKII is the lowest powered offering in Fuchs' more affordable Casino Series. Available in head and combo formats, this is a two channel, all-valve design. Useful features include a buffered effects loop, onboard digital reverb based on Fuchs' Verbrator pedal, and a footswitch for channel hopping and boost.

Fuchs amps combine point-to-point wiring with high-quality PCBs in aircraft-grade aluminium chassis and custom-wound transformers. This circuit is built around three DC-heated ECC83S preamp tubes and two 6V6s that can be biased individually; you won't need matched pairs.

Although its dimensions are relatively substantial for a 1x12, we are surprised by the cabinet's lightness. It's built from 'light ply', which Fuchs claims is environmentally friendly, highly resonant and roughly half the weight of birch ply and pine. The review amp is loaded with a Warehouse ET65 12-inch speaker, with Celestion and Eminence drivers available as options.

IN USE

Having grown accustomed to a regular diet of vintage-themed single-channel amps, we feel some trepidation as we approach a combo with channel switching and utilitarian 1980s stylings. As it turns out, no trip to the manual is required, because the Blackjack 21 MKII is an extremely straightforward amp. Starting in clean mode, it's apparent that Fuchs has put considerable effort into voicing this channel. Its most obvious attribute is clarity, but definitely not of the bright-but-bland variety. The tone is richly harmonic with enjoyable dynamics and a smoothness that enhances the playing experience.

With a Stratocaster plugged in, overdrive only makes an appearance as the clean gain control moves beyond the halfway point. The clean channels on some rock-oriented amps can be prone to breaking up in a rough and unrefined sort of way; in contrast, the Blackjack eases into a full-toned overdrive as dynamics begin to compress nicely and sustain increases dramatically.

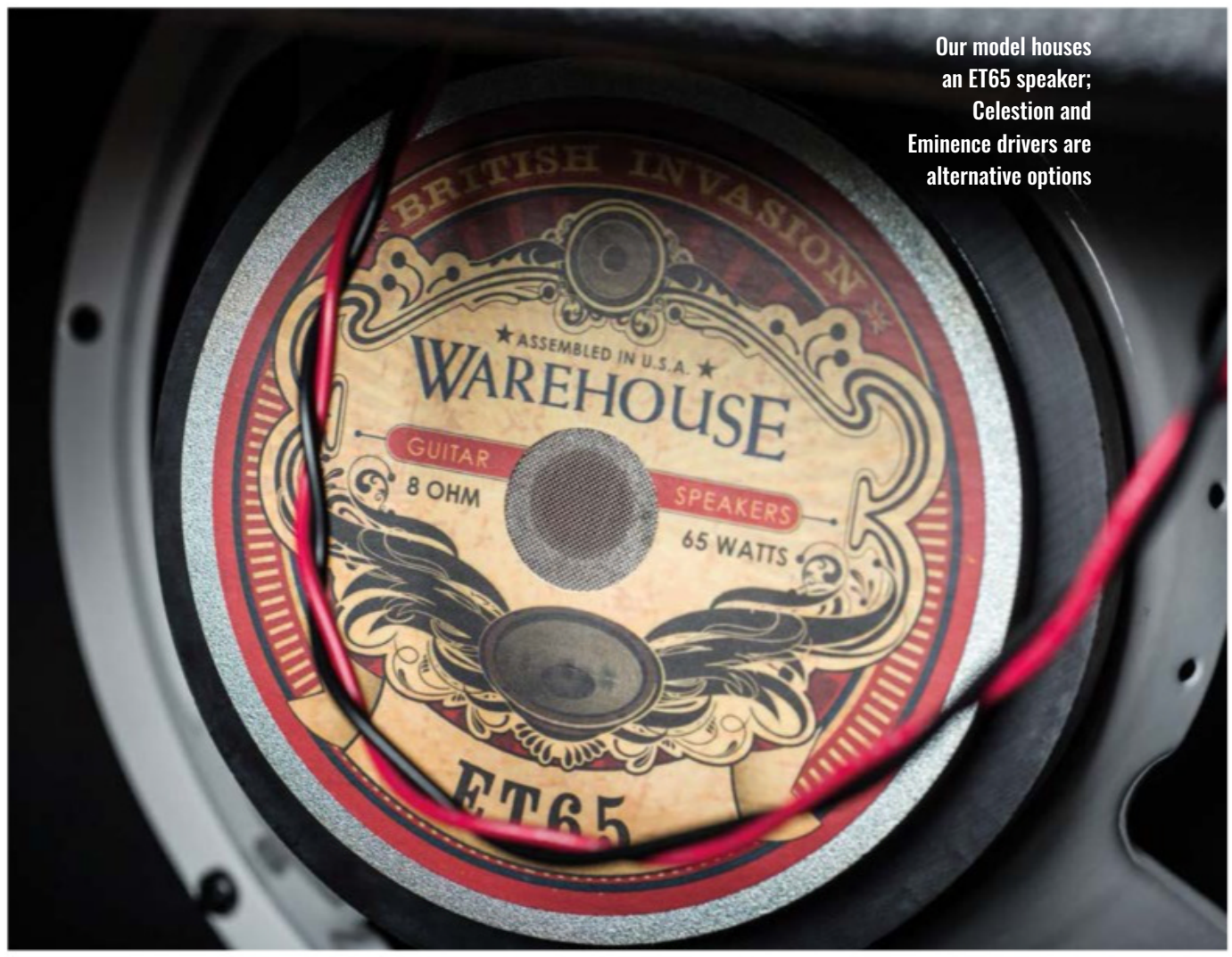
All the while, there's never any loss of clarity, even as harmonic overtones add a roaring thickness to the sound. Then, since the boost function works on both channels, it gives the clean channel enough kick to push it into a creamy overdrive with rock

The Blackjack 21 has onboard digital reverb based on Fuchs' Verbrator pedal

The overdrive channel offers Dumble-esque drive rather than metal mayhem

KEY FEATURES

PRICE £1,399
DESCRIPTION 2-channel Class AB valve combo with digital reverb, buffered effects loop and footswitchable boost. Built in the USA
POWER RATING 21 watts
VALVES 4x 12AX7, 1x 12AT7, 2x 6L6
CONTROL PANEL Power on/off, reverb decay and level, overdrive tone and master, low, mid, high, overdrive gain, clean gain, instrument input
REAR PANEL TRS footswitch socket, TRS effects send and return, 4/8/16-ohm speaker outputs, standby
SPEAKER 1x Warehouse ET65 12-inch, 8-ohm driver
DIMENSIONS 550 x 475 x 280mm
WEIGHT 16.5kg/36.4lb
CONTACT Coda Music
coda-music.com
fuchsaudiotechnology.com



Our model houses an ET65 speaker; Celestion and Eminence drivers are alternative options

powerchords and near-endless sustain for soloing. All the while, there's still enough transparency for the actual tone of the guitar to come through, so Strats sound like Strats, Les Pauls like Les Pauls and so on.

It's always a concern when two-channel amps only have one set of tone controls. This usually necessitates some degree of compromise, especially if you like clear and

At the rear is a TRS footswitch socket, an effects loop and 4/8/16-ohm speaker outputs

The Blackjack 21 MKII is powered by two 6V6s

bright clean tones but prefer darker crunch. So, it's fortunate that Fuchs has devised a clever workaround.

The dirty channel has two additional controls – a master volume, as you might expect, plus a tone control. The tone control is actually a treble roll-off, which allows you to dial any harshness or shrillness out of the treble when the tone-control settings have been optimised for the clean channel.

Again, Fuchs has judged things just right, because the dirty channel has such a wide gain range. With its gain control set almost fully counterclockwise and its tone control set just below halfway, you can set the master volume so the two channels sound identical when you switch back and forth.

This means at the lower end of the gain spectrum, the overdrive channel can be activated to provide a transparent boost with no noticeable change in tone. Alternatively, you can dial in more gain and level, which makes switching to the dirty channel more like activating a pretty superb valve overdrive pedal. Here, the tone control really comes into play because the MKII becomes brighter as the overdrive gain control is turned up.

The dirty channel is capable of considerable crunch, but as you might expect from an amp designed by Andy Fuchs, it's more of a refined and creamy Dumble-esque drive than a snarling modern-metal distortion. The Blackjack MKII always retains a sweetly airy treble, precise definition and clear note separation – even at high gain levels.

It's clearly very grown-up stuff and experiments indicate that most of the drive is coming from the front end rather than the power stage.

For practical purposes, we find it best to run the overdrive gain control at around 11 o'clock with single coils. This gives sufficient overdrive for powerchords and bluesy soloing and it leaves some headroom for the impressive boost feature. The amount of boost can be adjusted via an internal trim pot on the main PCB, but proceed with caution – it's not the most straightforward combo to disassemble. Besides which, we find the factory-set boost level just right for switching between rhythm and lead. The fizziness and oddly beating harmonics that frequently accompany boosting in high-gain amps are totally absent here.

The only feature that doesn't entirely convince us is the digital reverb. There's a lot of love out there for Fuchs' pedals, but to our ears, the tails sound a tad murky and the reverb level control has a hair-trigger quality that makes it tricky to dial in just a hint of ambience.

The Blackjack 21 MKII an extremely enjoyable and versatile amp. Chords ring with a clarity and balance that you only get with very well-engineered valve amplifiers. Similarly, the Fuchs allows notes to sustain and bloom, with a decay that's so smooth and even, every guitar feels more responsive and easier to play.

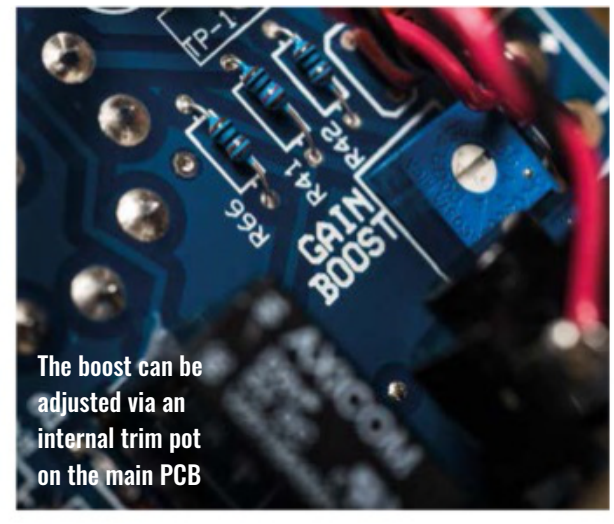
With its tonal range, volume levels and a sonic scale that belies its 21-watt rating, the Blackjack MKII is a safe bet. G

8/10 **Elegant cleans, classy crunch and all points in between, with extra features**

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

Rivera Venus Deux Recording **£1,490**, Marshall Studio Classic SC20C **£948**, Mesa/Boogie Express 5:25 Plus **£1,699**

Fuchs amps combine point-to-point wiring with high-quality PCBs



The boost can be adjusted via an internal trim pot on the main PCB

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BLACKSTAR
SUPER FLY

WORDS JOSH GARDNER

Blackstar hits the streets with a beefed-up version of its revolutionary mini amp designed for the busking crowd…

The big brother of Blackstar's game-changing Fly 3 mini-amp, the Super Fly is aiming to bring some of that Fly magic to buskers, street performers and open-mic'ers. Roughly double the size of its forebears, the Super Fly also sports twice as many three-inch stereo speakers and, at 12 watts, four times the output power.

While many modern digital amps are too complex for their own good, the Fly's brilliance was its simplicity and stellar tones that belied the tiny form factor. While the larger Super Fly is simple and straightforward, there's obviously more going on here.

So we get two separate instrument inputs – a standard jack for electric and acoustic guitar, and an XLR combo input for mics and line-level instruments – each with their own volume, two-band EQ and control for the digital reverb, while the guitar side adds a switchable overdrive channel and a gain knob. There are also 3.5mm line-in and Bluetooth options for playing over backing tracks – something solo performers are increasingly making use of.

In front of the control panel, there's a recessed hand grip for one-handed carrying, while the bottom of the cab sports a small kickstand. Power comes courtesy of eight AA batteries, or you can fork out for the optional PSU-2 power supply to keep you plugged in at home. If it's optional extras you want, then the Super Fly offers everything from the Super Fly ACT powered extension cab and a padded carry case, to a portable battery pack and a top-hat PA stand adaptor.

IN USE

This is the first Blackstar amp in recent memory without the company's ISF mid-shaping control, but upon plugging in an electro-acoustic, we're glad of the two-band EQ. With the tone controls both at 12 o'clock, the bass is a little unbalanced and we instantly reach for the treble to even it out. It's the same story when plugging in a Les Paul on electric mode – this thing certainly isn't lacking low-end punch.

With the EQ tweaked, things are much smoother and it's apparent that the Super Fly shares the same space-filling characteristics as its forebear, even at low volumes. Turning up the wick, things remain clear and articulate almost until

KEY FEATURES

PRICE £199
DESCRIPTION Battery-powered multi-instrument amplifier. Made in China
POWER RATING 12 watts RMS
CONTROL PANEL XLR combo input, jack input, mic/line switch, electric/acoustic switch, OD select switch, 2x volume, 2x treble, 2x bass, 2x reverb, gain
REAR PANEL XLR cabinet output, stereo mode switch, DC/Battery Pack input
SPEAKER 2x 3"
POWER 8x AA batteries, PSU-2 power supply (£29.99), Power Tank Battery Pack (£59)
ACCESSORIES Super Fly ACT 12-watt active cabinet (£119), PA stand top-hat adaptor (£11.99)
DIMENSIONS 284 x 214.2 x 156.7mm
WEIGHT 2.45kg/5.4lb
CONTACT Blackstar Amplification
blackstaramps.com

the very end – with impressive volume and projection. You'd easily be heard over a busy open-mic night, café gig, or even an extremely polite drummer.

Electric-wise, cleans are punchy and sweet, while the all-out distortion of the OD side has no business sounding as good as it does through such a small cab. The reverb, on the other hand, remains very polite and with a very short decay, even when cranked to max – don't expect instant spaghetti-western tones.

Plugging in a mic, the stereo speakers cope well with voice and guitar in unison and adding a Bluetooth backing track doesn't muddy the waters. There's some background hiss when you're not playing, but that won't matter when you are and it isn't noticeable through the headphone out.

Anyone wanting a beefed-up version of the Fly won't be disappointed, but this offers plenty more besides. With great sounds, easy portability and a seriously competitive price, the Super Fly instantly takes its place at the top table of go-anywhere performance amps.

8/10 **A great-sounding, affordable package for playing at home or taking on the road**

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

Roland CUBE Street **£229**, Boss Katana Air **£330**, Roland AC-33 **£369**

KEELEY ELECTRONICS
FUZZ BENDER

WORDS MICHAEL WATTS

Guitar EDITOR'S CHOICE

A versatile, hybrid fuzz with active EQ and some angry tones that go way beyond the retro stylings. Could this be the one fuzz to rule them all?

Fuzz pedals have been responsible for some of the most visceral, primal guitar sounds ever committed to tape (or indeed hard drive) – and as a direct result of the work of guitarists such as Jack White, Annie Clark and Dan Auerbach, the past decade has been replete with fuzz-driven monolithic riffs and a corresponding spike in fuzz-related activities.

Fuzz-pedal designs range from Swiss-watch intricate to blunt-force-trauma simple. The new Fuzz Bender from Keeley Electronics promises to hit the sweet spot between those two extremes, with a sophisticated combination of two modern silicon and one vintage Japanese germanium transistors and an intuitive five-knob layout.

Presented in a landscape format with top-mounted jacks, retro-style knobs and orange lettering on its white case, the Fuzz Bender is an attractive unit with looks that hint at the tonal quality to come.

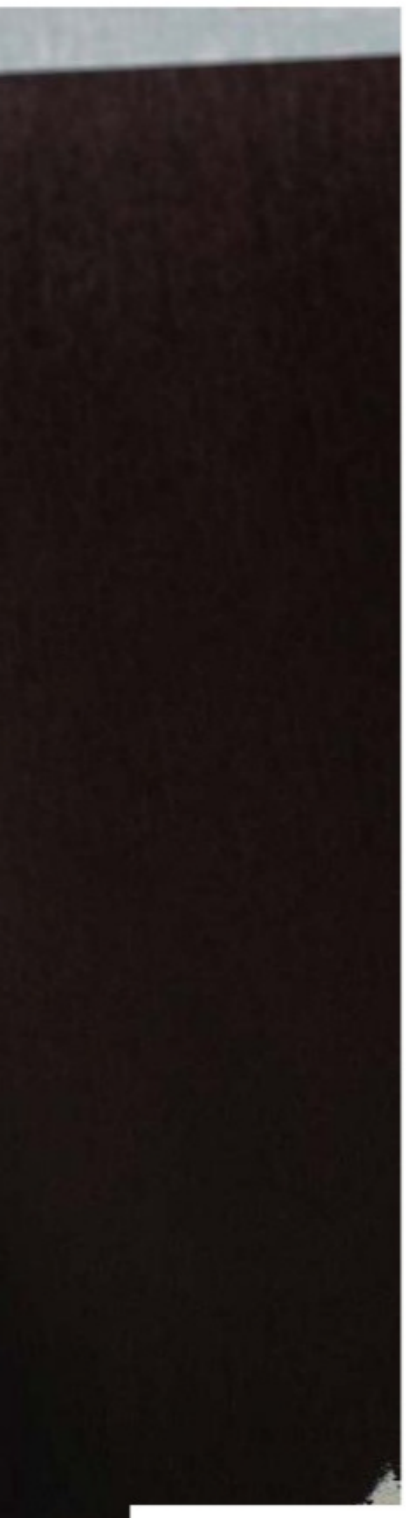
IN USE

With the bias knob fully counterclockwise and the remaining four knobs at noon, we're greeted by an aggressive whirlwind of fuzz. Muff-like in character, but with more definition than the average Pi, it's confrontational but controlled.

Rotating the bias knob clockwise brings out more spitty, spluttering voltage-starved flavours which work particularly well with a bridge humbucker. Things become increasingly random the further you go on the dial, with plasticised tailspins and throttled sounds leaving your notes clawing for the safe word.

This is not quite a gate as such; instead, it regulates the shape of your sound from square wave overload to spikey, sawtooth chaos. Many 'twin transistor' fuzz pedals offer a switch to toggle between voices, but in this case, a knob-based blend makes for a far smoother experience. While the bias knob may play a vital part in the Fuzz Bender's sound, man of the match has to go to the pedal's active equalisation, which offers +/- 20dB at 100Hz and 10Hz. Together with the level and fuzz controls, this is the true heart of the Fuzz Bender.

The amount of 'push' on offer makes for a hugely versatile unit. If you've never punished your amp with +20dB of bass, then we can wholeheartedly recommend you try it at least once. It's a huge sound! The Fuzz Bender's treble voicing is focused at around 10k and the more you boost it, the closer it gets to an octave effect with



The Bias control modifies the character of your fuzz, between square-wave flavours and sawtooth chaos

KEY FEATURES

PRICE £149
DESCRIPTION Hybrid germanium and silicon fuzz pedal. Made in the USA
CONTROLS Level, bass, bias, treble, fuzz
DIMENSIONS 60 x 110 x 55mm
CONTACT robertkeeley.com

the capacity to coax out some extra beeps and squeals as you explore.

The Fuzz Bender reminds us just how versatile fuzz can be when supported by an active EQ circuit and powerful gain staging. Further experimentation with the level and fuzz knobs brings out a wide variety of usable, no-compromise tones which retain the high-quality character of the pedal throughout. "You have to get it to explode and bloom," says the Fuzz Bender's creator, Robert Keeley, of the ideal fuzz sound. That is exactly what he's achieved here.

9/10 **A sensational, versatile fuzz which will appeal to connoisseurs and novices alike**

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

Black Arts Toneworks Son Of Pharaoh **£159**, Union Tube & Transistor Tour Bender **£299**, Fuzzrocious Blast Furnace **£229**

BECOS
COMPIQ PRO STELLA COMPRESSOR

Guitar EDITOR'S CHOICE

WORDS RICHARD PURVIS

We've seen rackmount studio compressors with fewer controls than this little pedal from Romanian maker Becos. We put it through its paces and ask: can it possibly sound as 'pro' as it looks?

Becos is a small but extremely ambitious stompbox brand from the Black Sea port of Constanta in Romania. The Stella is the company's flagship compressor for guitar and bass and it's quite something to behold in terms of its promise: a compact pedal with nine knobs, four toggle switches and seven LEDs.

The idea behind it is to pack all the features of a serious VCA compressor into a pedalboard-friendly format – and with the same audio quality. That's what we mean by ambitious…

Controls for ratio, threshold, attack, release and gain make-up are self-explanatory and having a wet/dry mix dial is an increasingly popular trick; but then we come to the stuff you really don't expect to find on a pocket-sized stomper.

'Tilt EQ' can be used to boost treble and cut bass or vice versa, around a pivot point that can be set to either 1kHz or 330Hz. The attack and release controls can be bypassed with fast or slow presets and the knee can be set to hard or soft.

The sidechain filter lets lower frequencies through without triggering the compressor too quickly and you can choose between 'normal', 'low' and 'deep' settings for this. Finally, you have the option to take the uncompressed part of the mix and overdrive it to simulate tape saturation.

If all that has set you running into the loving arms of your two-knob Dyna Comp, please don't be daunted – in practice, it's a lot simpler than it seems.

IN USE

VCA compressors are known for being fast and transparent and that's what you get here: it doesn't make things sound drastically different, just magically nicer.

Single notes are thickened without thumping, and chords gel together in a way that somehow makes you sound like a better player. And while the added sparkle means this is not as pure a compressor as the great Origin Effects Cali76, that'll be a plus for some players.

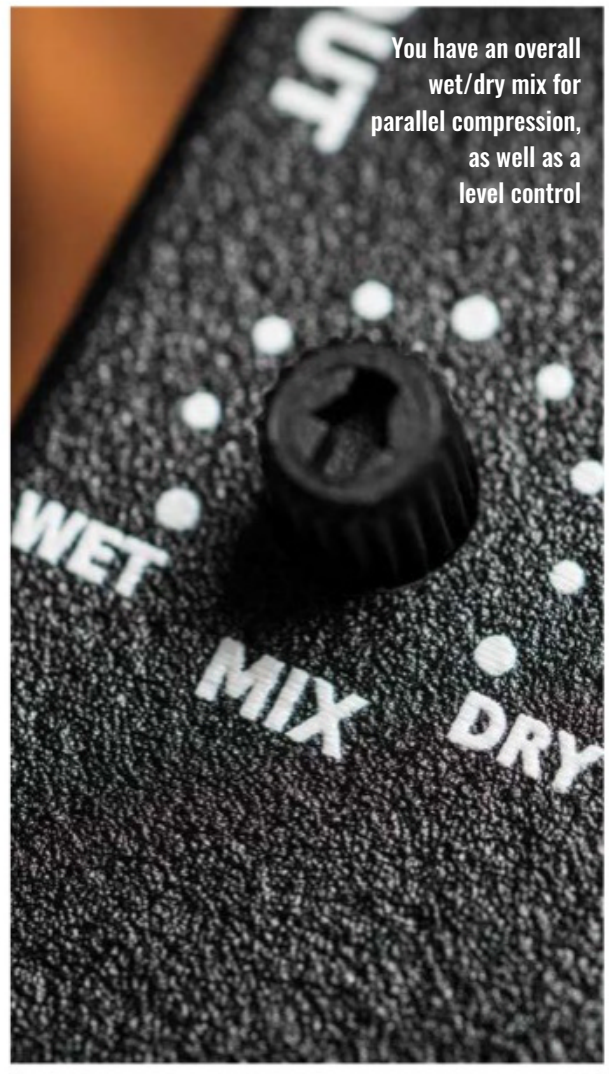
There's no real need to stray from the basics with either guitar or bass: stick to soft knee, normal sidechain and fast timing

This is a fully featured unit compared to many guitar-pedal compressors, with sidechain filtering options and more

KEY FEATURES

PRICE £223
DESCRIPTION VCA compressor pedal. Made in Romania
CONTROLS Ratio, threshold, attack, gain, tilt EQ, release; wet/dry mix, dry saturation, dry level; toggle switches for hard/soft knee, neutral/low/deep side chain filter, high/low EQ pivot, manual/fast/slow timing; internal circuit jumpers for EQ bypass and dry signal low cut/high cut
FEATURES True bypass; powered by 9-volt battery or mains supply (minimum 12mm barrel tip)
DIMENSIONS 113 x 68 x 50mm
CONTACT Becos becosfx.com

An analogue tape-saturation circuit adds harmonic distortion for a warm, vintage feel



You have an overall wet/dry mix for parallel compression, as well as a level control

and it's just a question of tweaking the ratio and threshold to taste, then playing with the gain and EQ for balance. Hiss never becomes a problem, and dialling in some gritty tape saturation can be a great way to further energise a clean tone.

Drawbacks? Well, those switches are almost impossible to get at, unless you have lollipop sticks for fingers. And more importantly, the pedal won't work at all if the barrel tip on your power supply is less than 12mm long. Plenty are 10mm: if you don't like using batteries, you'd best check.

That aside, this really is a proper gem of a compressor. Becos sells direct via its website, with free shipping within the EU; if you're in the UK, it might be worth grabbing one right away, in case that situation no longer applies. G

9/10 **Becos, you're worth it – this is a stupendous little compressor**

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

Origin Effects Cali76 Compact Deluxe **£279**, ThorpyFX The Fat General **£220**, Keeley Compressor Pro **£299**

JUST BECOS

INTERVIEW JOSH GARDNER

We meet Costel Burlan, the Romanian pedal guru behind BecosFX, to find out how he got into the pedal-building game, how he came up with the Stella and what makes his compressor so special…

How did you first get into building pedals?
"Since I was a child, I've been tinkering with electric circuits, doing things by hand and learning electronics as a hobby. It wasn't until I was around 15 that I developed a passion for music and then I started to dive into the world of music gear.

"It all came naturally, I think. Playing music and chasing *the tone* were related – and so six or seven years ago, I started designing my own things, out of necessity. The BecosFX product we debuted with was the Micro Booster onboard guitar preamp and soon after, I created my first pedal, the TS8-MS MIDI Overdrive/Switcher."

What made you want to create the Stella?
"Most of the compression pedals on the market today are based on fairly simple (yet effective) circuits, but have too little control over the audio processing. The higher-class compressor pedals are either optical or FET-based circuits and they usually add colour to the sound which is not always desirable. Although they are sometimes preferred for exactly that…

"I wanted to come up with something completely different in terms of control and using a Blackmer VCA as the active element was the only way to achieve that, while having the sound quality necessary to match a studio-like compressor.

"Then I realised that I might have a competitive edge if I managed to pack more features in a smaller footprint, give full control over compression dynamics and make it as transparent-sounding as possible. Adding the tape saturation was the last-minute idea – a nice-to-have complementary feature, which gives the option of adding a sensitive colour-touch to the pristine, high-performance processing of the THAT Corp's Analog Engine used in this pedal. I believe the CompIQ Stella has its own place in the higher-end class of compressor pedals."

The Stella really packs a great deal of functionality into a small stompbox – what are the challenges in designing a circuit such as that?
"It was really difficult to jam this many functions into a little enclosure, but that was the thing: I wanted to have a professional, rack-like compressor, packed into the smallest enclosure possible; and still have room for a 9V battery inside. I don't think it can be shrunk any more than that!

"I also wanted the audio path to pass through bigger audio-grade Wima and Kemet capacitors. A lot of tech requirements! The circuit is pretty hefty and the board could only be done in multi-layers – something uncommon in most pedals, which aim for simplicity instead. Finding the high-quality mechanical parts that are tiny enough to fit all in a regular pedal size was an even bigger challenge. Sourcing parts from multiple countries is rather inconvenient, but necessary for a complex product. However, that was not all.

"Fabrication is a thing in itself and since the pedal is hand-built, it takes a lot of effort. It is the only way to be done, because big components have to be assembled into a specific order, some parts need to be trimmed and adjusted by hand and the final assembly is time-and-energy consuming. Without using SMD [surface-mount device] technology, this would have been impossible to make."

What's next for Becos?
"In terms of product development, I have a road map for diversification. The MINI ONE which was just launched a couple of months ago, was the third in the CompIQ series of VCA-based compressors. A dual-band compressor is in the making and is planned to be released by the end of this year.

"Two other pedals are in the final design stage, one of which is a full-analogue tape-saturation effect. As for the other, I think it will be a nice surprise for many, so I won't disclose what it is, yet. In terms of business, I need to make the products be more visible and put them on music shop's shelves!"

Find out more about BecosFX at becosfx.com

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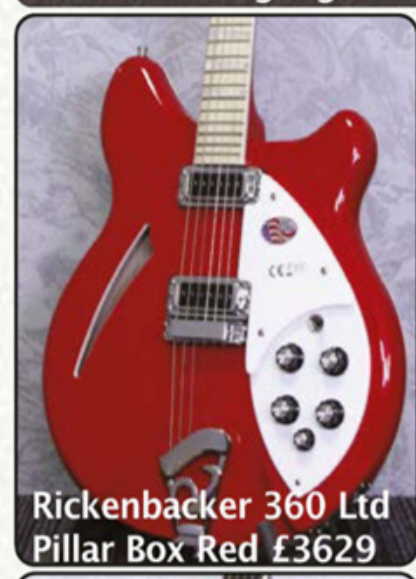
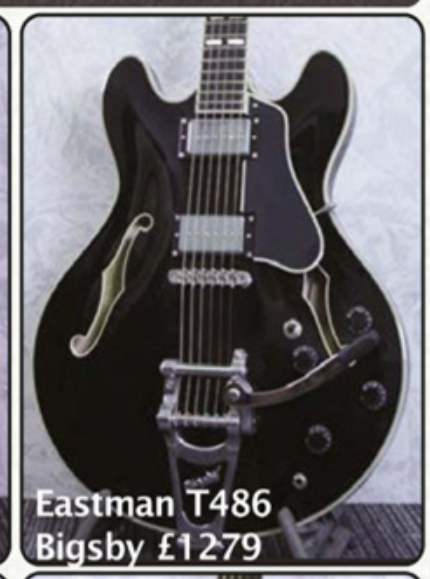

Rickenbacker 360 Ltd
Pillar Box Red £3629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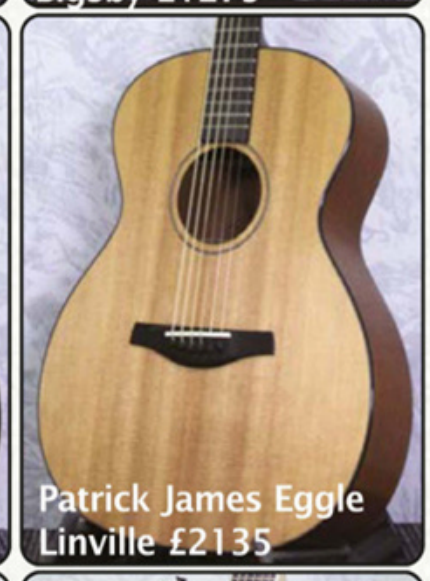
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MOOER
PREAMP LIVE

WORDS DARRAN CHARLES

Does this affordable, pedalboard-friendly digital modeller have the features and tones to scare the competition?

With lunchbox-sized amps and effects-pedal miniaturisation being very much on trend in recent years, it's no surprise the modelling world is also watching its waistline. Enter the powerful yet dainty Mooer Preamp Live: a feature-laden digital modeller in stompbox form. No bigger than a paperback and weighing in at just over one kilogram, it's obviously been designed with portability and pedalboards in mind.

When connected to the Mooer Studio software editor, the Preamp Live features over 50 preamps, all based on a wide range of famous amps, from well-known classics to present-day boutique circuits. A dozen of these amp models are accessible at any one time when loaded into the banks A, B, and C of the unit. Each bank has four patches and each patch can be accessed via the unit's quartet of footswitches.

Patch modifications can be made either by using the physical controls on the front panel – which give access to EQ staples such as treble, bass, and presence – or for more in-depth changes, you can connect via Bluetooth and, using an impressively simple interface, edit settings using your smartphone. So far, so modern.

IN USE

The Preamp Live can be used in a variety of different ways: integrated with your amp via the four-cable method, direct into a PA, or even hooked up to both amp and PA at once, with a cab-simulated DI running from the XLR output and the preamp signal with cab sim disabled routed to your amp's effects return.

As we're currently tracking guitars for an album using Axe-Fx and Kemper profiles, we choose to evaluate the Preamp Live's tones by going direct to DAW. There's a wide variety of cabinets, power amps and mic models from which to choose and you can even upload your own impulse-response cab sims via Mooer Studio. We head for the heavy profiles and load into the bank a patch modelled on a Peavey 5150.

While the depth and tonal nuances aren't quite as detailed as you might expect from the higher-end digital modellers, we still hear an eminently faithful reproduction of the 5150's trademark growl, tautness and attack, providing a great platform for metal-infused playing.

Some of the more vintage-style mid-gain and clean sounds seem initially to lack clarity and depth, but this has a lot to do

You can run a cab-simulated DI from the XLR output while routing the preamp signal back into your amp

KEY FEATURES

PRICE £329
DESCRIPTION Digital preamp modeller and cabinet simulation stompbox. Made in China
CONTROL PANEL Volume, bass, mid, treble, gain, boost (pre and post), master, presence, FX level, cabinet simulation on/off toggles for XLR and jack output, 4x footswitches
REAR PANEL Input, send, return, output, ground lift, XLR out, MIDI in/out, headphone out, USB, 12V DC in
FEATURES 62 preamp models (50 preset, 12 user), 30 speaker cabinet and 11 microphone models. Noise gate
DIMENSIONS 230 x 130 x 54mm
WEIGHT 1.18kg/2.6lb
CONTACT Mooer Audio, mooeraudio.co.uk

The Mooer Preamp Live packs flexible connectivity into its bijou enclosure

with the absence of onboard effects. With a dash of delay and sprinkle of reverb added via the effects loop, any perceived absence of sparkle is remedied, allowing the tonal characteristics of the individual amp models to become more recognisable.

One of the most interesting features is the Tone Capture function. With your amp connected, the unit can analyse and capture the tonal characteristics of its preamp stage. It's actually a very simple process and using a Mesa F-30 combo as our guinea pig, the results are quite astonishing. Once the very quick 'capture' process is completed, we're left with an eerily accurate tonal replica of the F-30. You can then save this sound to the Preamp Live and get away without taking the amp to your next gig.

As a pure modelling device with hugely flexible connectivity, the Preamp Live has plenty to recommend it, especially to players of a heavier persuasion. When you throw in the ability to capture and blend in tones from your own amplifier collection, £329 becomes a very tempting proposition indeed. G

8/10 **Potentially the new standard bearer for affordable digital modellers**

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

Line 6 AMPLIFi FX100 **£189**, Avid Eleven Rack **£589**, Line 6 Helix **£1,199**

ISOACOUSTICS STAGE 1

WORDS HUW PRICE

Guitar EDITOR'S CHOICE

KEY FEATURES

PRICE £129
DESCRIPTION 4x acoustic isolation feet for speaker cabinets (up to 90kg). Made in China
DIMENSIONS 40 x 90mm
WEIGHT 2kg/4.4lb
CONTACT scvdistribution.co.uk, isoacoustics.com

Acoustic isolation products are commonplace in the pro-audio and hi-fi worlds, but most guitarists still rest their amplifiers on chairs and beer crates. Is there a better looking and sounding solution?

Based near Toronto in Markham, Canada, IsoAcoustics draws on years of experience of designing and constructing radio and television studios and has been manufacturing isolation products in the audio industry since 2012.

Our Stage 1 review package arrives with four chunky isolator feet that can be screwed to the bottom of a cabinet, or onto a board for use with multiple amplifiers. Wood screws and full instructions are provided, but if you don't want to make your own board, then watch this space – the Stage 1 Board is coming soon, complete with a carrying handle cut-out.

IN USE

When evaluating products such as this, the differences are often very subtle indeed, but in this instance, the sonic benefits are clear and obvious. The promotional material stresses improvements in bass punch, but we hear differences across the entire frequency range.

Our test amp is a Brownface Fender Deluxe loaded with a Celestion Ruby and lifting it onto a plywood platform fitted with Stage 1 isolators produces an immediate increase in clarity and detail. There's less boom in the bass, but most startling is the way the upper harmonics appear to be set free to bloom and shift.

We sense we're getting more sustain; the effect is much the same on concrete floors and carpet. No doubt this would be even more noticeable on bouncy stages.

Using this product isn't as dramatic as upgrading a speaker – a better analogy might be swapping factory pickups for a boutique set. Just as fine pickups will make a guitar an improved version of itself, the Stage 1 isolators will help an amplifier sound the best it can. Think your amp sounds awesome already? You could be in for a pleasant surprise.

9/10 **Offers improved clarity and focus and is likely to outlast foam-based alternatives**

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

AcouFoam Speaker Cabinet Isolation Pad **£29.99**, Auralex Gramma v2 **£84**, Harley Benton Amp Iso 1 **£25.74**

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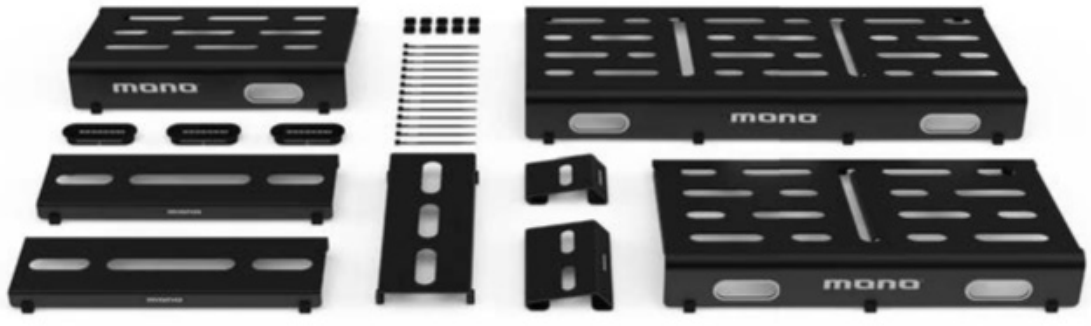

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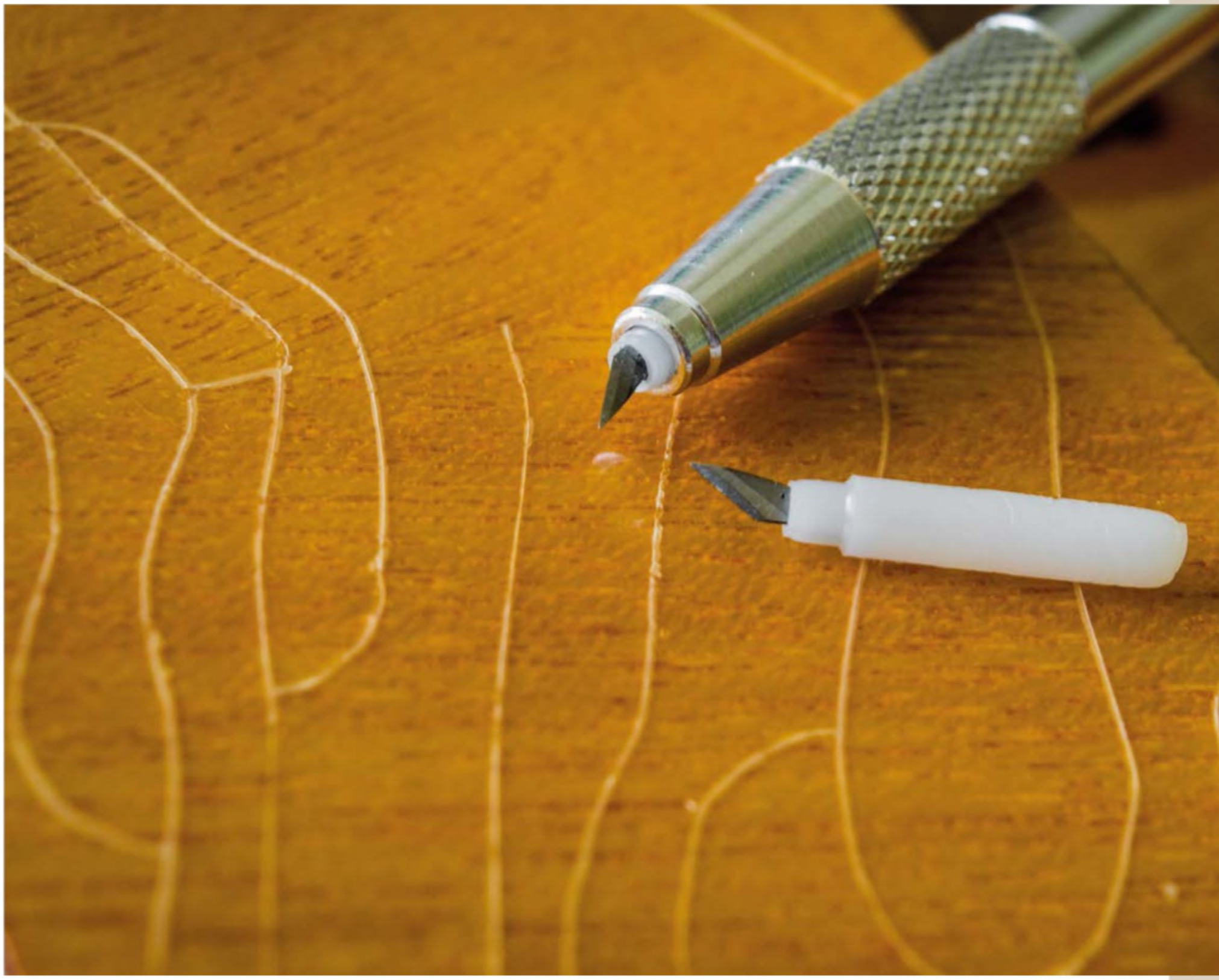
DO IT YOURSELF

HOW TO CONVERT AN EPIPHONE FLYING V TO 1950S SPEC PART TWO

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY HUW PRICE

Our quest to convert a Joe Bonamassa 'Amos' Flying V to golden-era specifications concludes with a refret, a nitrocellulose respray, some sympathetic ageing and a set of genuine vintage parts…



The first part of this Flying V upgrade project ended with the body ready for spraying and the post holes plugged. But before donning the breathing mask, there are a few things I need to do. The first is to refret the guitar using wire that's close to 1959 spec. Original frets on a 1958 Flying V would have been thinner, but the gauge chosen by our guitar's owner is still a lot skinnier than Epiphone's jumbo wire.

What follows is a very straightforward fret installation, followed by end dressing, levelling, then crowning and polishing. I decide to string the guitar up and test it, but in order to do so, I first have to locate and drill the bridge post holes. I jack the bridge up on some wood blocks to approximate the correct action and the strings are brought up to pitch.

Prior to starting this project, I noticed that some of the saddles were adjusted to their extremes in order to set the intonation, so by slightly altering the position of the post holes, I'm able to establish a better starting position for the bridge. I use a tiny drop of Super Glue to fix the old nut temporarily, then put the tuners back on.

After stringing up and tuning to concert pitch, I experiment with bridge positioning. The bass side stays much the same, but I move the treble side very slightly towards the neck. Once I'm happy, I select a brad-point drill bit that's exactly the same diameter as the post holes in the bridge. The holes hold the bit square and by lightly tapping the top, the brad point marks the centre for the new post holes in the dowel plugs I glued into the body last time.

Ideally, you should use a drill press to make the holes, because the posts need to be square to the body. To tap the thread, I put one thumbwheel on the post, followed by a washer, then a nut.

As the nut tightens against the washer, the post itself turns and works its way into the body. With both inserted, I perform a quick setup and notice a slight increase in sustain and a fuller-sounding midrange compared to the factory configuration.

The final tasks before spraying include veneering the front of the headstock – using 0.4mm maple here rather than holly – and installing a bone nut to replace Epiphone's plastic part. Allparts UK (allparts.uk.com) sells a drop-in bone nut specifically for Epiphones, which makes the job a lot quicker and easier than usual.

The respray is very straightforward because I was able to preserve the base coat. All the lacquer comes from Manchester Guitar Tech (manchesterguitartech.co.uk) and I begin with cellulose sanding sealer. This is sprayed on thick, flatted back and sprayed again. The second coat of sanding sealer is flatted back; I spray the headstock black before emptying three tins of clear gloss. After a few weeks, I wet sand, polish and buff and the fun stuff can finally begin.

GET CRACKING

The brief for this guitar is a fairly heavy relic and, having enjoyed using a blade to

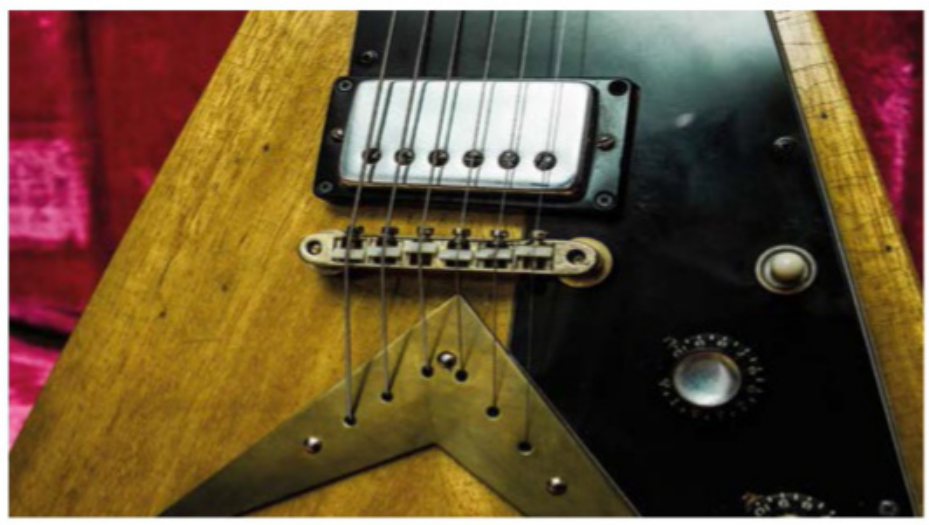
simulate lacquer checking on our Goldtop project, I'm keen to do more of the same.

I've been happy with the results I've achieved with a hot-air gun and an inverted air duster in the past, but it's a bit too random to guarantee a vintage Gibson look. Besides which, I'm not convinced that the factory base coat will allow the lacquer top coats to check using that method.

Fresh blades are needed, so I visit The Range (therange.co.uk) and find a craft knife with a tiny blade that swivels (product code 132493). It's designed for cutting smooth curves and since that's something I struggled with during the Goldtop project, I figure it's worth a try.

Using pictures of vintage Flying Vs as a visual guide, I inflict a few minor dents and dings before setting about cutting the checking lines. When you have to do an entire guitar, it's a long process, but watching the transformation is a blast.

The swivelling knife blade makes cutting the lacquer feel more like drawing on the lines. So, if you're planning on trying



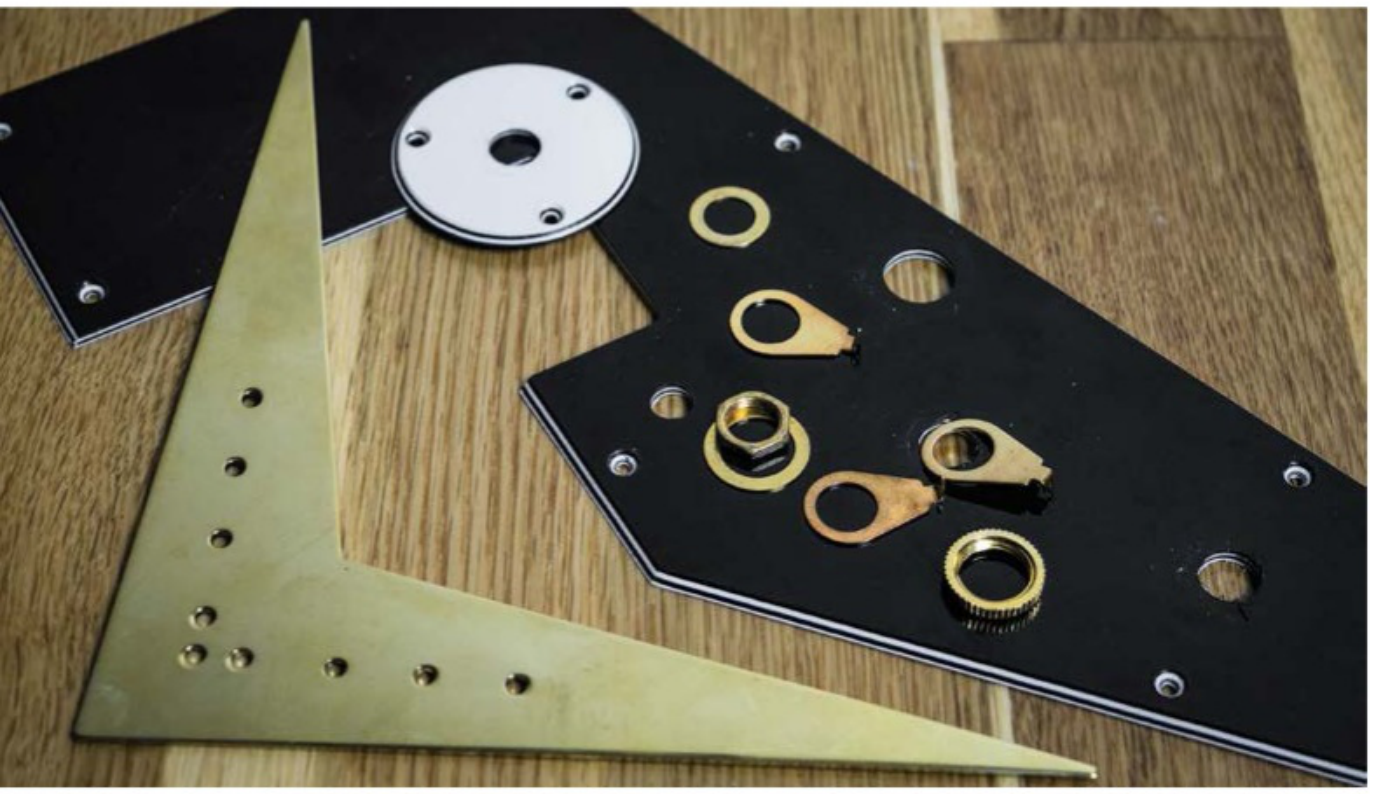
OPPOSITE This swivel-headed craft knife makes cutting curved checking lines a lot easier

ABOVE TOP The pickups used here are a pair of late-1960s Gibson Patent Number humbuckers that were a lucky find on Reverb

ABOVE Small patches of masking tape are placed onto the headstock to mark the screw positions for the truss-rod cover

LEFT TOP The truss-rod adjustment slot has been elongated and it has extra thickness in the area adjacent to the nut to accommodate the cover screw

LEFT BOTTOM The bridge is a gold-plated Gibson Patent Number ABR-1 with nylon saddles



something similar, it's well worth the £2.50 (including three replacement blades).

To highlight the cut lines, I apply solvent-based Colron Jacobean Dark Oak dye, allow it to wick into the cracks and then wipe the lacquer clean using naphtha lighter fluid. The stain also creates the illusion of dirt inside the dents and simulates the grey look of oxidised wood.

Colron altered the formula of its wood dyes a few years ago and has relaunched them in new 'refined' incarnations. Unfortunately, the new product is nowhere near as effective for our admittedly somewhat specialist purposes, so when my tins of stain eventually run out, I'll be looking for alternatives.

REAL VINTAGE

Even in this day and age, there are occasional bargains to be had. The pickups earmarked for this project are a case in point, as they recently popped up unexpectedly on a Reverb listing for a 1970s Greco Les Paul copy.

The guitar itself had a bolt-on neck and was of no great interest, but while taking photographs for the listing, in an attempt to illustrate the body construction, the seller had lifted the pickups out and exposed their undersides.

Gibson Patent Number decals were there for all to see and they looked bang-on. The owner of our Flying V decided to take a punt and as a result, he managed to score a set of late-1960s Gibson Patent Number humbuckers with chrome-plated covers (and a free 1970s Greco) for just over £200.

This prompted a rethink about the end goal for this project. It's common knowledge that the original Flying Vs were made in 1958 and 1959, but it's less well-known that Gibson continued making custom-order Vs all the way through to 1966. The Flying V was reissued the following year, in much-modified form, but the earlier 1960s examples were made from bodies and necks left over from the 1950s. Gibson used current production parts, so some ended up with Patent Number pickups, later potentiometers and wired bridges with nylon saddles.

Since this guitar's owner already has a few 1960s pots, tuners and bridges stashed away in his parts box, we decide that this conversion will be done to 1966 specifications – a year when Gibson is reputed to have made just two Flying Vs.

FERRULES ARE MADE TO BE BROKEN

Much of the finer work on this guitar had to be based on internet image searches. My hands-on experience of 1958 Flying Vs is limited to a sneaky strum in a London guitar shop about 20 years ago and I don't know anybody local who owns one. One detail I notice during my research is that 1950s Vs don't appear to have string ferrules.

Digging a little deeper reveals that there are ferrules, but they sit well inside the string holes and are barely visible. The wood around the edges of the holes ends up looking quite dark and you can see edge marks where countless strings have been pulled through. Sourcing suitably short ferrules of the correct diameter proves impossible, so I decide to shorten the Epiphone ferrules by sawing their ends off.

In addition, if you look closely at Flying V photos, it becomes obvious that the V-shaped tailpiece plate behind the bridge is made from brass. Frustratingly enough, all the supposedly vintage-correct replacement parts seem to be gold-plated. I can't say whether Flying Vs left the factory with string plates that were gold plated or simply polished brass, but if you want to achieve a vintage-correct look, oxidised brass is a must.

I manage to source a raw brass plate from a luthier friend and I use an antique-restoring trick to age it. I pour a small amount of ammonia into a container and put a jam jar inside with the tailpiece plate on top so it's above the liquid. The lid goes onto the container and I allow the plate to sit in the ammonia fumes for a few hours.

It's best to clean metal parts thoroughly before starting this procedure to remove any dirt and grease – and take care, because ammonia is nasty stuff. Wear goggles and a breathing mask, work outdoors and check the plate every hour or so to monitor its progress. After three hours, the plate is looking exactly as I hoped.

Ageing gold-plated parts is relatively easy. The gold will dull, or even rub off

completely if you use a Brasso pad and I tend to follow up by dipping the parts in PCB etchant before rinsing in water. The jack socket, switch nut and knob pointers are all aged this way.

PICKING THE 'GUARD

The Epiphone 'Amos' Flying V was a limited-edition reissue in the spirit of Joe Bonamassa's famous original. As such, it arrived with a repro customised metal truss-rod cover and a black plastic pickguard. The intention here is to go for a more generic look and we decide to replace the truss-rod cover with the regular 1950s type.

To do so, I glued a rectangle of maple veneer under the headstock veneer, before I fitted it, to bring the thickness up to 2mm in the truss-rod slot adjacent to the nut. This is needed to provide something substantial enough for the cover fixing screw to bite into. In the process, I also lengthen the slot so I can introduce the longer end of the Allen wrench when adjusting the truss rod.

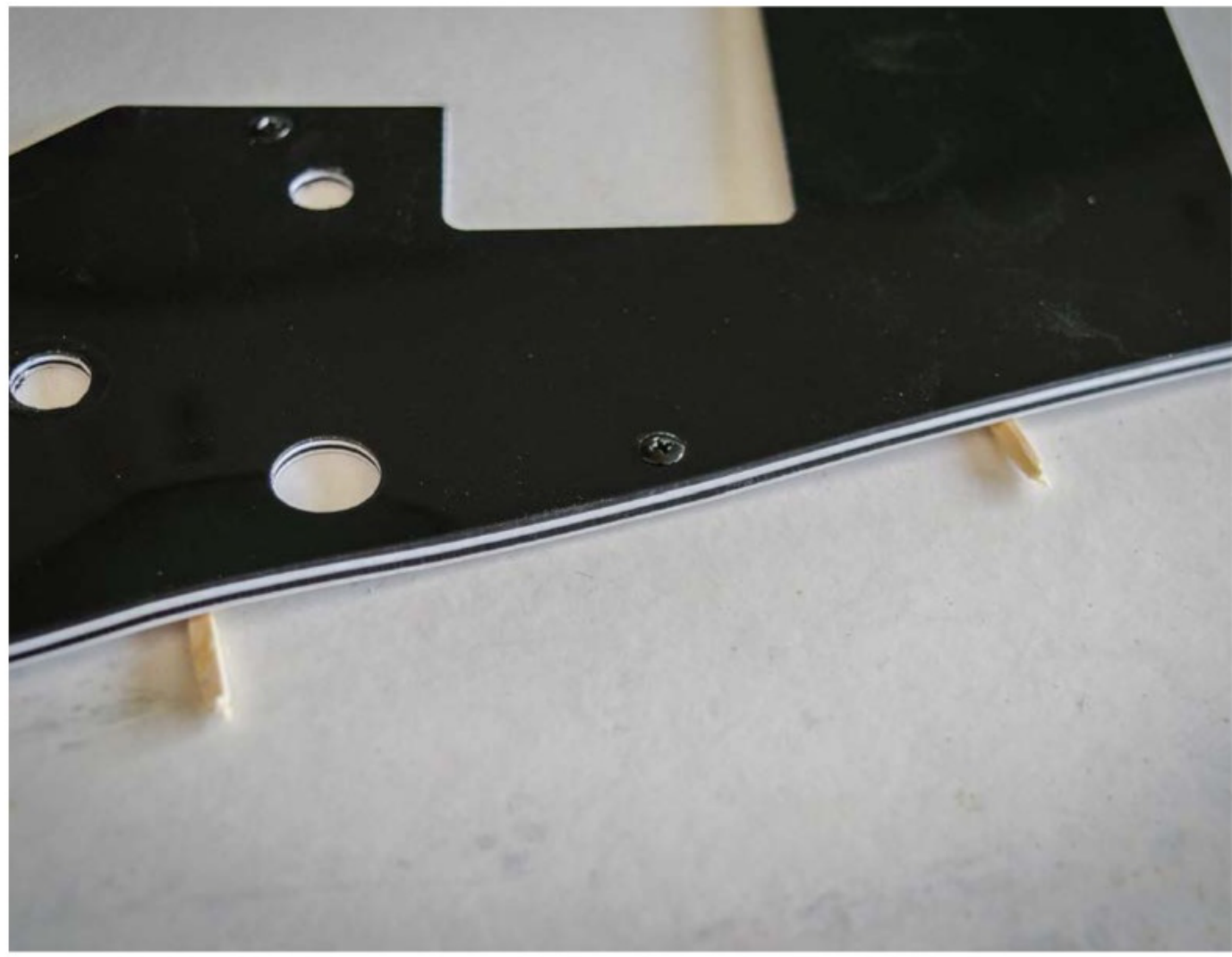
A white pickguard is on order from CreamTone (creamtone.com), which makes one specifically for the Epiphone 'Amos' Vs. This is important because the 50s-spec Gibson 'guards don't fit. At the time of writing, the pickguard is halfway across the Atlantic, so rather than wait, I decide to relic the black one instead.

I use 3200 and 6000 grit Micro-Mesh to knock back the shiny plastic surface without dulling it too much. Micro-Mesh produces far more convincing results than fine sandpaper, Scotch pads or wire wool.

Next, I screw the pickguard onto a backing board with matchsticks strategically placed between the screw holes. The screws are tightened to touch the surface, then I carefully heat the plastic using a paint-stripper gun.

Care is needed at this point, because I don't want to melt the plastic, but instead merely soften it. I keep the gun moving continuously and after a short while, the plastic rapidly transitions from solid to pliable. At that point, I tighten the screws and the plastic bends over the matchsticks to simulate warping.

I allow the pickguard to cool before removing the screws and then wipe the white bevelled edges with brown and amber stain dissolved in a 50/50 water and acetone solution. This mellows the bevelled



OPPOSITE TOP The plastic- and gold-plated parts are Epiphone items, but the V-plate is custom-made from solid brass

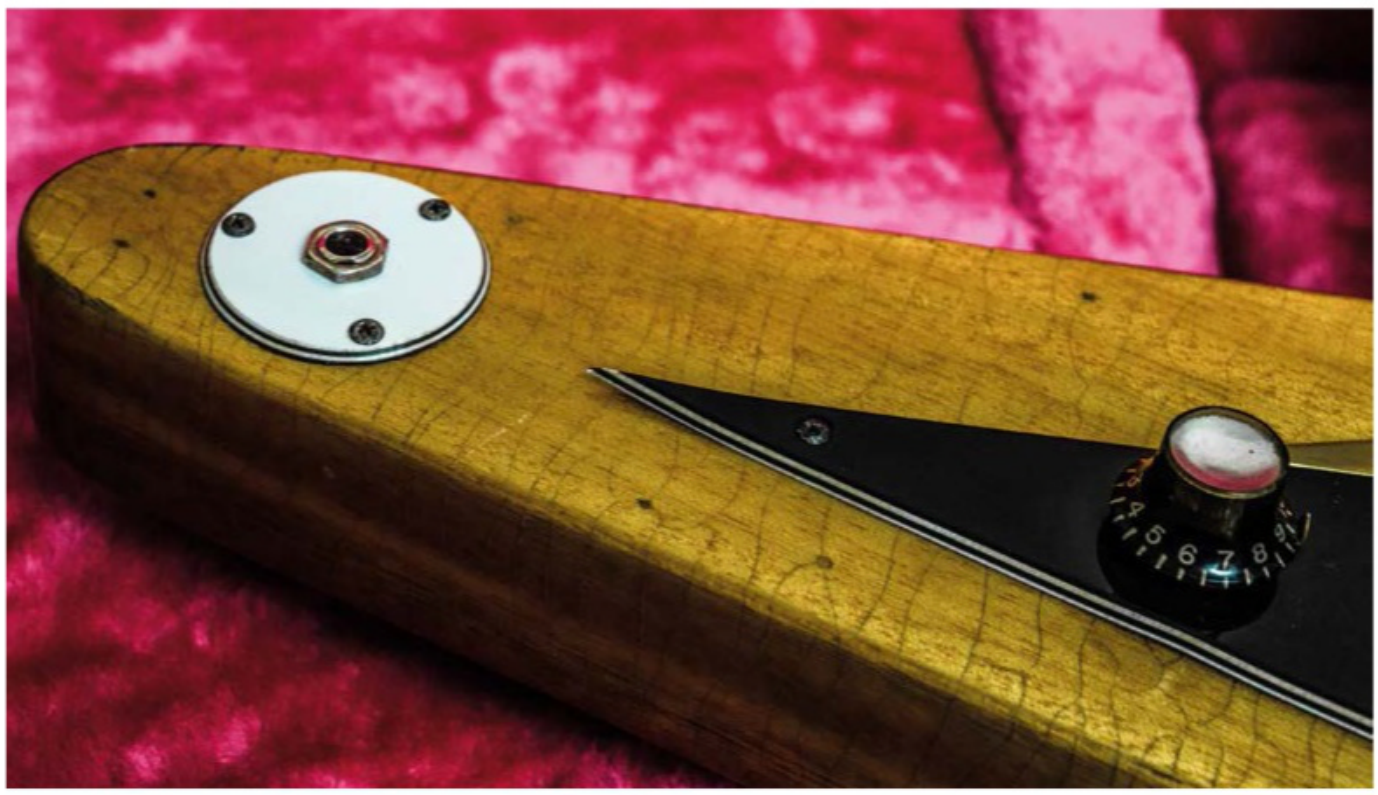
OPPOSITE BOTTOM After a rubdown with a Brasso pad, a dip in PCB etchant and rinsing in water, the metal parts are set aside to dry

ABOVE TOP Matches are placed between the screws, a paint-stripper gun softens the plastic and the screws are torqued down to simulate pickguard warping

LEFT TOP This guitar is being fitted with three 500K pots from 1964 and an old Bumblebee tone capacitor and here, we're about halfway through the job

LEFT MIDDLE The headstock gets a repro truss-rod cover and some relic'ing in the shape of checking lines and edge chips

LEFT BOTTOM The checking lines are less apparent on the rear of the headstock, but the vintage Klusons work smoothly and really look the part



ABOVE TOP Although 50s Flying Vs had earlier-style knobs, the mid-60s Vs had reflector knobs like this trio of originals

ABOVE The plastics have been dulled with Micro-Mesh, warped and stained along the edges

OPPOSITE The Epiphone ferrules sat proud of the surface, but on 50s Vs, they were deep inside the holes. We shortened ours for a vintage look

RIGHT We continue the front-and-back checking lines over the edges and join them together on the sides

edges very nicely and I dab my stain-soaked Q-tip into each of the countersunk screw holes to finish up.

HOOKING UP

With the pickguard done, I'm able to wire up the controls using a set of 1964 potentiometers and a Bumblebee capacitor. The control cavity is quite cramped, so I'm careful to keep everything as neat and compact as possible.

I would also advise that Flying Vs don't seem to have been designed with easy maintenance in mind, so use your multimeter and test the circuit through an amp before screwing it down and stringing up the guitar.

Having already done a trial run before spraying the guitar, I feel pretty confident that very little work will be required to get the guitar playing nicely. The brass V-plate is positioned after the pickguard has been screwed down, held in place with masking tape and pilot holes are drilled for the fixing nails. A ground-wire channel has already been drilled from the area under the plate to the control cavity and a bare wire is positioned under the plate.

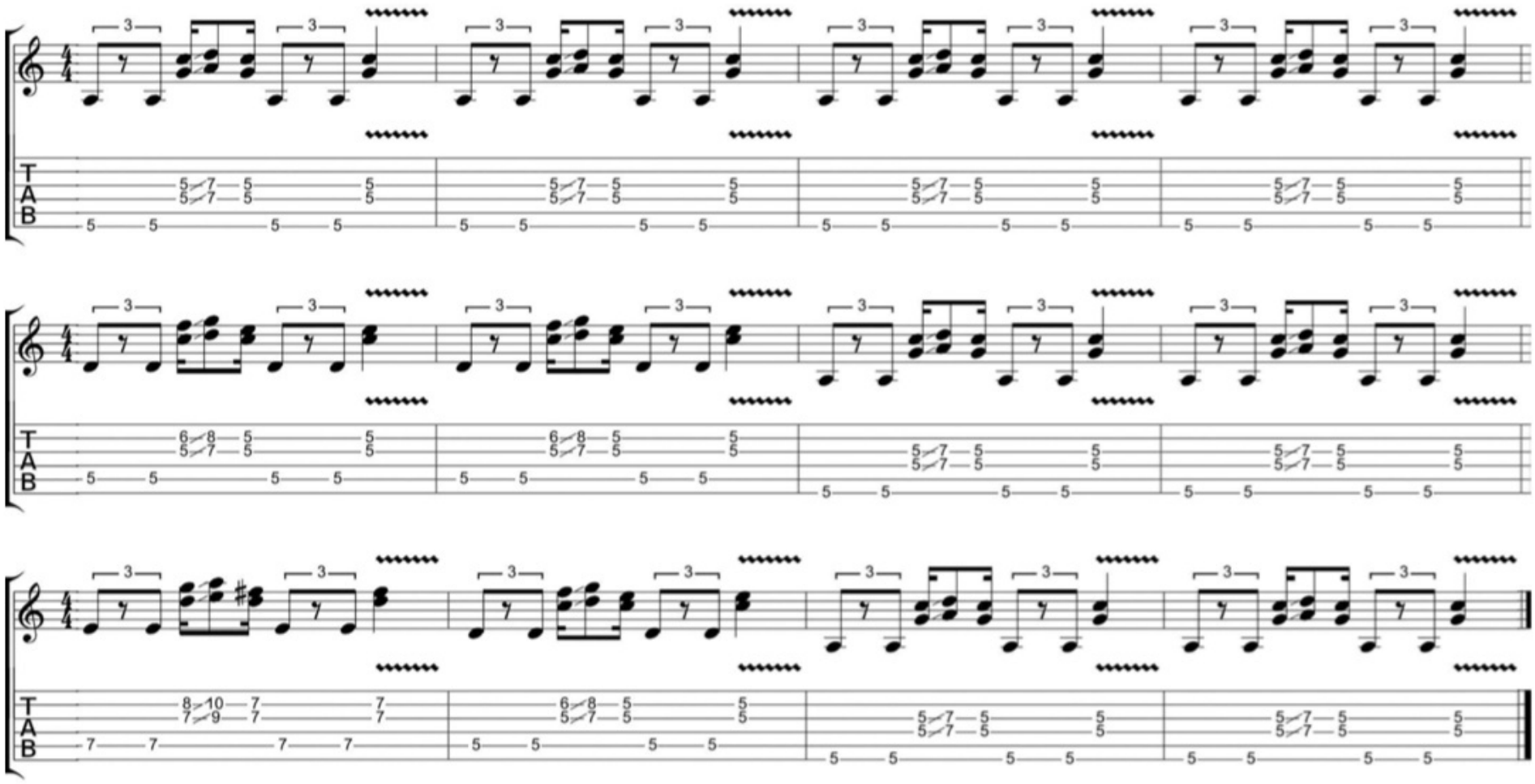
A late-60s Patent Number Gibson ABR-1 bridge with nylon saddles is mounted on the newly installed bridge posts and with the strings loosely tensioned. I set the action by eyeballing it. Slight adjustments are made once the strings are tuned to pitch and the Flying V is up and running.

The Patent Number pickups have a mellow aggression, but they possess a sensitivity that's not unlike PAFs. They're also quite microphonic and, in conjunction with the bridge, they help to give this guitar an authentically vintage tone and dynamic response.

With the rubber anti-slip pad fixed on using double-sided carpet tape, the Flying V is actually quite comfortable to play seated, but it's even better on the strap as everything seems to fall into the right position. It's taken a lot of work, but I'm pretty thrilled with the way this project has turned out. I just hope its owner agrees…

© Stringer/Getty Images

Chuck Berry merged rhythm and lead via his artful use of doublestops

DOUBLESTOP RHYTHM

PART EIGHT DOUBLESTOPS

WORDS LEIGH FUGE

In the latest instalment of our beginner's guide to the blues, we incorporate doublestops to add some classic blues licks to the mix

Last time, we talked legato and how we can tie together notes to give our scales and lead lines more flow and depth. In this lesson, we're going to look at another concept that will add something new to our lead guitar playing: doublestops.

A doublestop, or a dyad as it is more formally known, is a set of two notes played simultaneously which, in some contexts, may imply a chord. Doublestops can be used for a variety of reasons within blues music – you can use them to spice up your rhythm parts or you can use them within lead passages to add a rhythmic feel (think Chuck Berry).

First, let's take a look at what doublestops we have available to us in the A minor pentatonic scale.

We can use these doublestops in a variety of ways. Let's begin with a look at how we can use them within the context of a 12-bar blues rhythm.

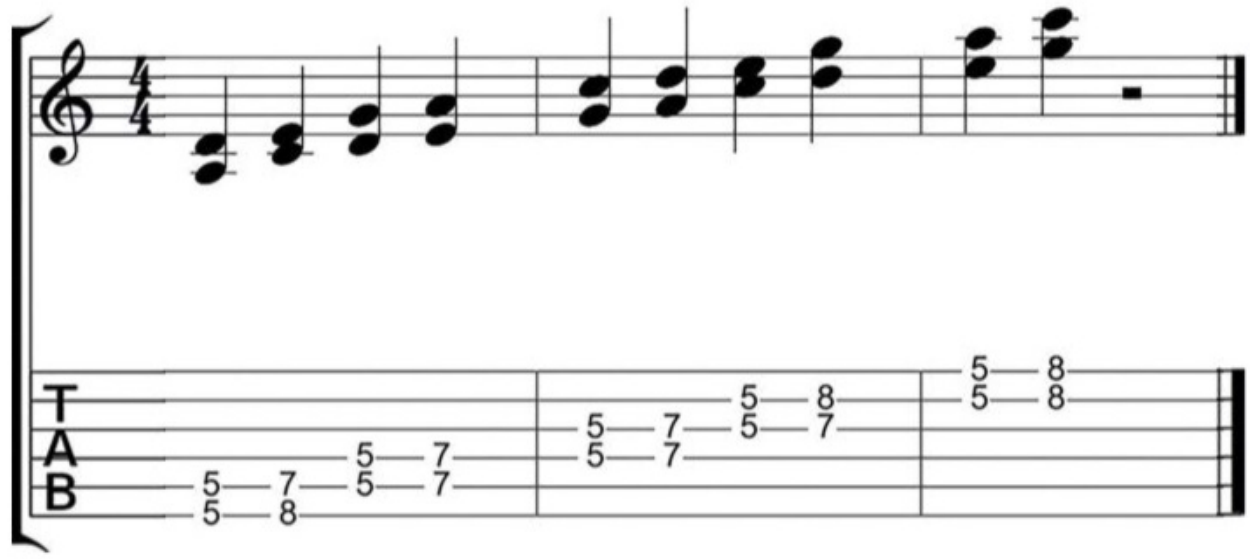
If we look back at our initial lesson on the structure of a 12-bar blues, we can take the chord principles we encountered and apply some rhythmic doublestops to really make things interesting.

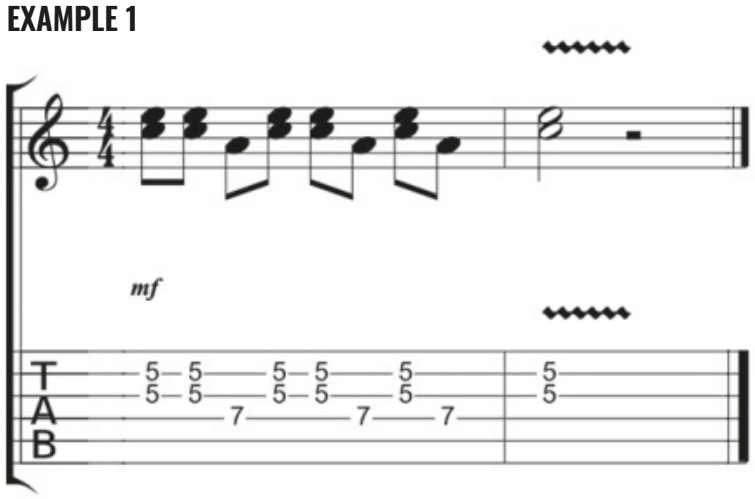
Each bar in this example is related to an A chord. The first four bars in this cycle all fit over an A chord. The first beat contains an eighth-note triplet with a 5th-fret note on the 1 and 3 of this beat; think of a shuffle feel. The second beat is a slide using a doublestop before another eighth-note shuffle feel on the third beat.

The bar ends with a doublestop ringing out for a whole beat.

The only change will be when you hit the D chord (bars 5, 6 and 10) and the E chord (bar 9). The doublestop will take place on two different frets on the third and second (G and B) strings. This is to keep the interval between every note the same, due to the difference in tuning on the third and second (G and B) strings.

This rhythm applies across all the other bars in the 12-bar structure. Using doublestops in this way will give your blues patterns more of a 'riffy' feel – useful when you're the only guitarist in a band. Enjoy the slide and really dig into it to get it to pop out. Don't forget to add plenty of vibrato onto the final doublestop.

THE DOUBLESTOP

EXAMPLE 1



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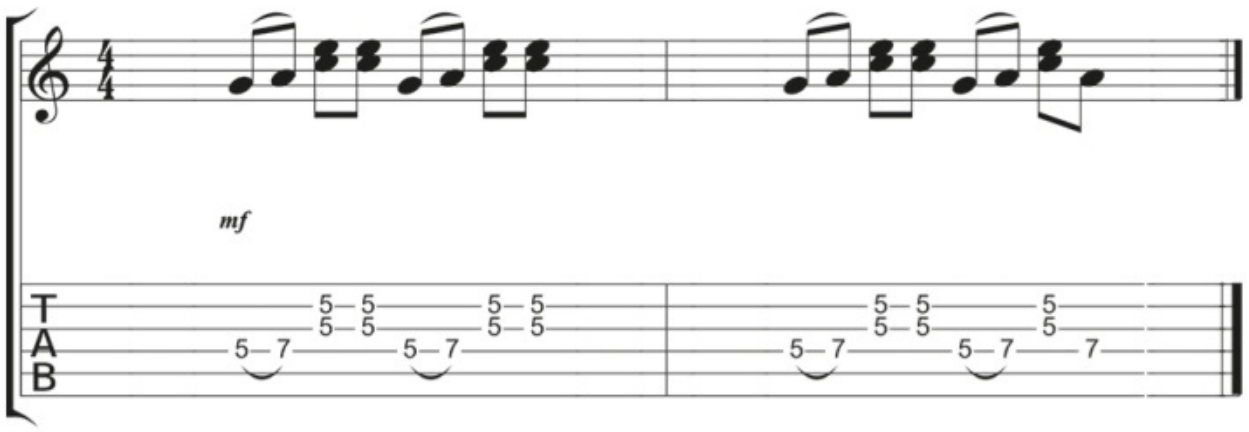

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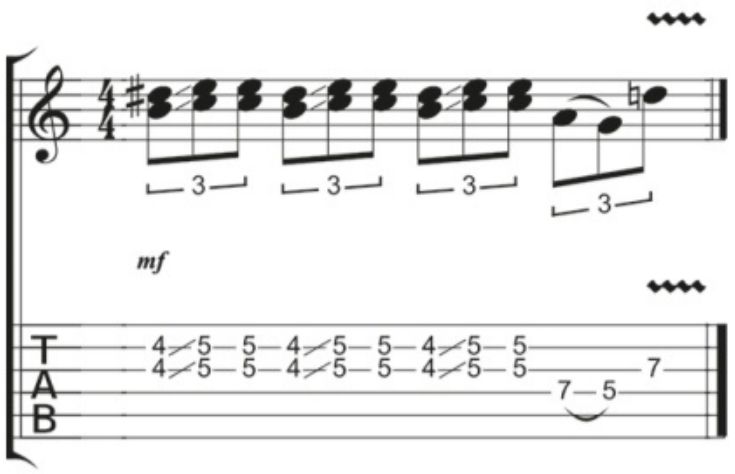
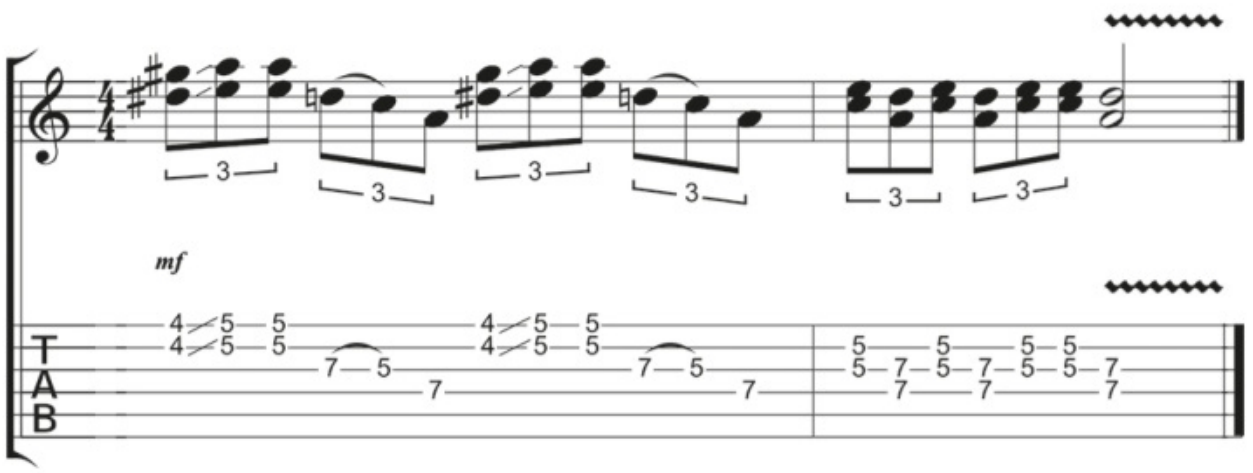


EXAMPLE 4



EXERCISE 1

This technique isn't confined to rhythm – we can also use doublestops in the realm of lead guitar. Here is an example of a doublestop-style lead line. It's quite simple to start off, as the big challenge will be in alternating the picking between hitting the third and second (G and B) strings for the doublestops and the single note on the fourth (D) string.

This lick is straight eighth notes across the entire first bar.

EXERCISE 2

This lick starts with a hammer-on from the 5th to the 7th fret on the fourth (D) string before two doublestops on the 5th fret of the third and second (G and B) strings. This is played as eighth notes with the hammer on covering beats 1 and 3 and the doublestops covering beats 2 and 4.

The second bar ends slightly differently, with the last two notes (which land on beat 4) containing a single doublestop hit and a single 7th-fret hit on the fourth (D) string.

EXERCISE 3

Sliding doublestops across the fretboard is a great way to add some interesting textures to your lead parts. The 4th fret we are starting on is outside of the A minor pentatonic scale, but starting on this outside note and sliding into the 5th-fret position will give the lick a minor-blues tonality. This lick would be similar to something you might expect to hear played with a bottleneck or slide guitar and imitating licks you hear in these styles is a great way to expand your doublestop vocabulary.

The trick with the lick in Exercise 3 is to maintain the triplet feel throughout, but keep it loose so that it doesn't sound too metronomic.

EXERCISE 4

One player renowned for the use of doublestops within guitar breaks is the aforementioned Chuck Berry. The lick in Exercise 4 is influenced by Chuck's rhythmic solo style and contains a triplet feel throughout. The first bar starts with a 4th fret slide to the 5th fret on the second and first (B and E) strings to create that slide-guitar feeling we discussed in Exercise 3.

This is followed by a three-note phrase starting with a pull-off from the 7th to the 5th fret on the third (G) string and ending on the 7th fret of the fourth (D) string. The second half of the bar is a repeat of the first half.

The second bar alternates between doublestops on the 5th fret of the third and second (G and B) strings and the 7th fret on the fourth and third (D and G) strings, before ending on a sustained doublestop.

TRY IT YOURSELF

Doublestops are a fantastic addition to your trick bag and can be used to infuse solos with a raw, rhythmic feel. When working with doublestops in a blues style, keep them loose and flowing.

If you've enjoyed this lesson and you're looking for a guitar teacher, check out our guitar lessons page on mgrmusic.com and get in touch with one of our highly recommended tutors. G

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Leigh Fuge is a guitar teacher and professional musician from Swansea in the UK. He's taught hundreds of students face-to-face and via the MGR Music platform. To find a qualified guitar tutor in your area, visit mgrmusic.com

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Bowie's inventive chord progressions were just one of his many songwriting hallmarks

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CHORD CLINIC

HOW TO PLAY DAVID BOWIE-STYLE CHORDS PART TWO

WORDS ROD FOGG

Following on from Part One of our look at some classic Bowie chord sequences, we add strange intros and adapt some piano parts for guitar…

David Bowie was never a virtuoso guitarist, but he didn't need to be. That said, he was a very competent rhythm player and played acoustic guitar in the background of many of the classic early tracks. He also frequently played the iconic intro parts.

Figure 1 is typical of the sort of thing you'd hear on the *Hunky Dory* album and is by no means easy to play. The difficulty stems from the need to leave the open first (high E) string ringing in both chords. This means using fingers two, three and four at the third fret in the first chord and then the thumb over the sixth string in the second chord. If you're going for that Bowie vibe when writing songs, don't forget that Bowie seldom used material from his verses and choruses for his intros – we think a G minor would work well to start off a verse after this.

Another challenge here is that we are at the lowest end of the guitar, where the frets are furthest apart and the nut is trying to hold up the strings that we are trying to press down. It's also important to use the tip of the first finger to mute the sixth (low E) string in the B♭ chord – another tricky aspect of this sequence. All these examples are meant to be played with the pick, and preferably on acoustic; in figure 1, try a 'one-and-two-and-a' rhythm and make the most of the dissonance provided by the open first (high E) string.

Moving on to figure 2, the A major chord is essentially the same shape as the Fmaj7 chord in figure 1, except that it omits the A string, which can be muted using the tip of the third finger. Once again, we have the open E string, but this time it doubles the note which is already at the top of the chord.

This same open string also gives us an added ninth in the D minor chord. The thumb remains where it is, holding down the note A on the low E string and creating the slash chord 'D minor added ninth with A bass'. Repeat these two chords as often as you like and then use the F major chord to climb out of the sequence before stopping dead on the plain D minor barre chord and pausing for four beats before repeating the whole pattern.

FIGURE 1

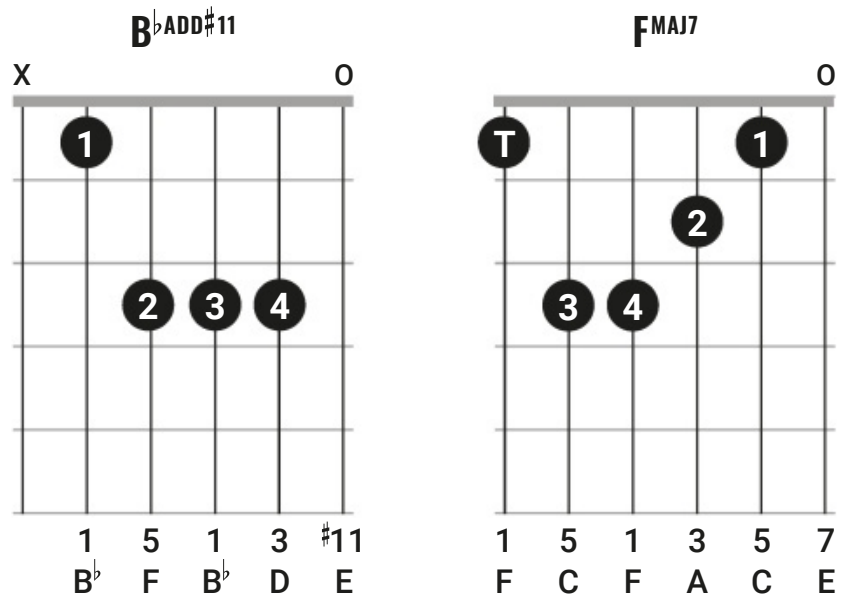

FIGURE 2

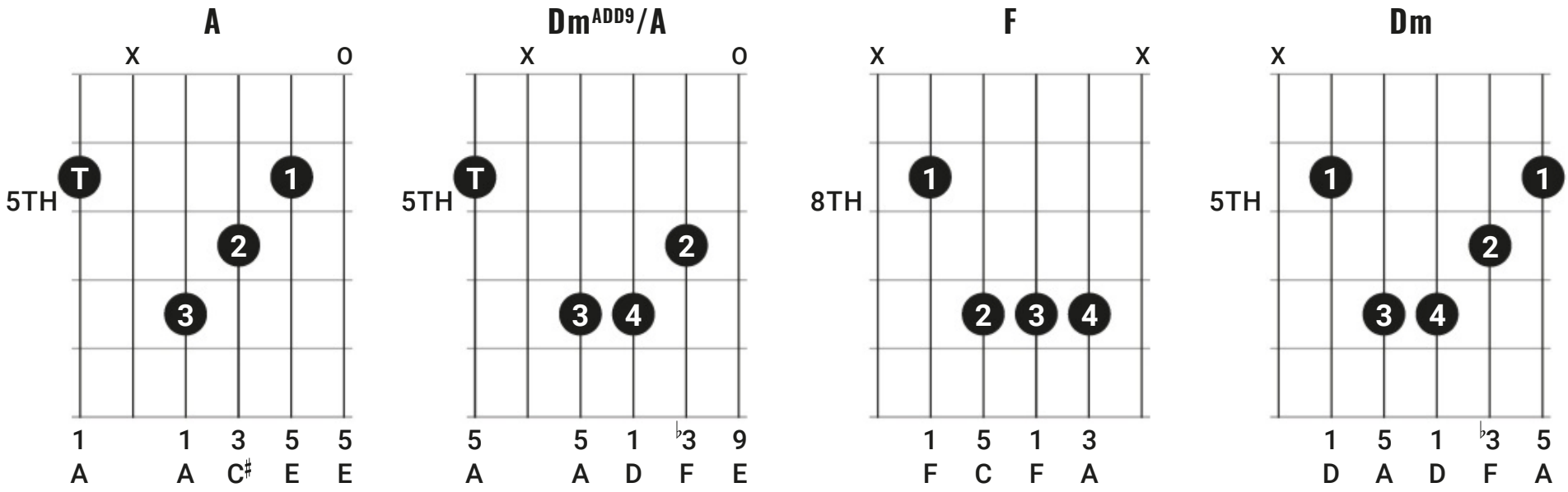

FIGURE 3

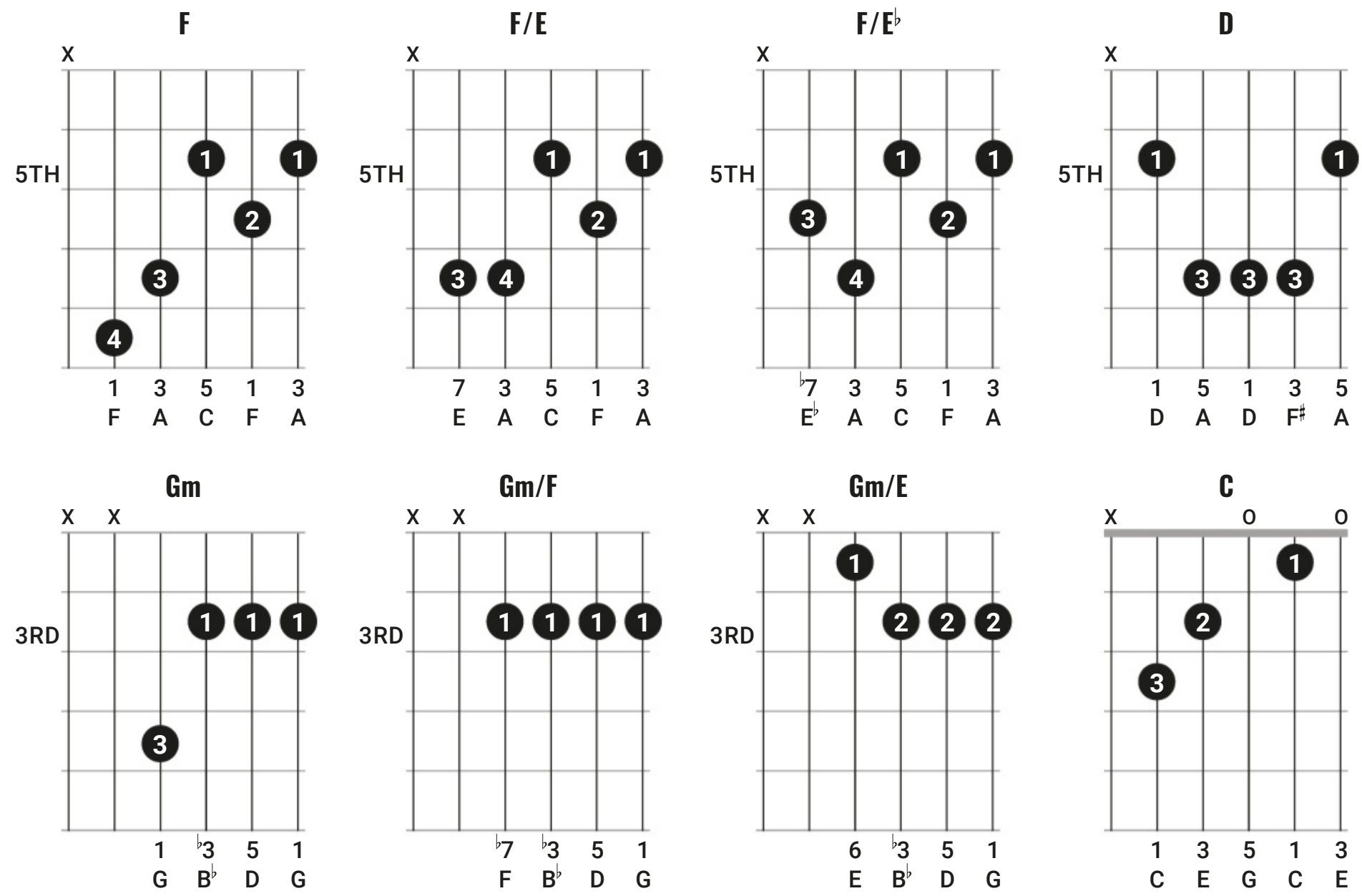

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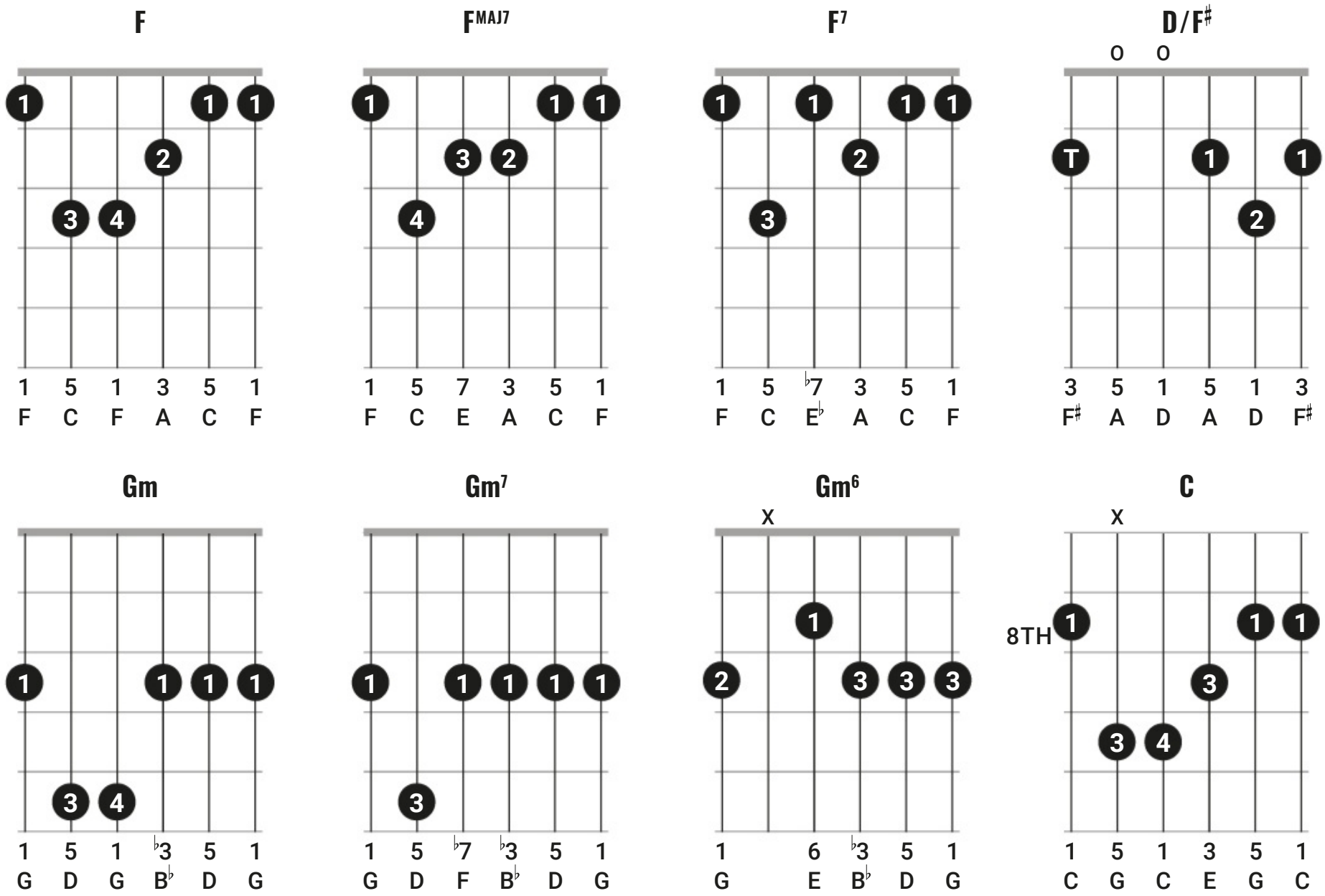
FIGURE 4



Pianist Rick Wakeman added considerably to the palette of sounds available to Bowie on *Hunky Dory*. In figure 3, we take a look at an eight-bar chord sequence inspired by one of the piano tracks on the album, which has a distinctive descending bassline. One way to play this on guitar is to pick the bass note of the chord first and then lightly strum the upper notes of the chord. Aim to hold onto the bass note so it rings throughout the bar.

Between the chords F/E and F/E♭, it should be possible to simply slide your third finger down one fret, making this change much more straightforward. If playing a D major chord with your third finger lying down is a challenge, use fingers two, three and four are like we did for the F major chord in figure 2.

Getting a bit theoretical for a moment, it is worthwhile to take a closer look at some aspects of this chord sequence. While descending basslines are in themselves not exceptional, the F/E♭ chord is effectively F7 in third inversion. F7 is the dominant of B flat, so we could reasonably expect B flat major (or possibly minor) to be the next chord. It could for example be B♭/D, thus preserving the chromatic bassline.

Instead, we get the D in the bass, but as the root of a D major chord, which is the dominant chord of G and the music swerves off towards G minor to continue its seemingly continuous descent.

In the hands of a pianist, we could imagine the bass note of each chord being played with the left hand and the remaining notes with the right hand. Figure 4 reimagines the entire sequence as if Bowie had played it, perhaps as an intro, on an acoustic guitar, using the big five- and six-note chords that he often seemed to prefer.

The descending bassline has been moved to an inner part on the D string, and apart from the inclusion of D/F♯, which pushes even more strongly towards G minor, the chord sequence remains essentially the same. Compare this version to figure 3 and consider using either of these approaches next time you are working out some chords on guitar. G

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TALKBOX

JARED SCHARFF

INTERVIEW JOSH GARDNER

The *Saturday Night Live* guitarist talks talent shows, magic Stratocasters and the importance of matcha…

The moment it all started…
"I think maybe the first defining moment for me and guitar was my eighth-grade talent show. That was my first big performance. The next and very important moment was during an Allman Brothers Band concert. I was watching a solo section and they were all jamming and I had that moment of, 'This is what I want to do with the rest of life.' To be up there, creating, jamming, being free and playing music."

I couldn't live without my…
"My 1994 Fender American Standard black Strat. It's been with me forever and it's a part of me."

The one that got away…
"Before I got my black Strat, I wanted to get this Ibanez really bad. My dad took me to a guitar store and we were about to purchase this Emerald Green Ibanez Saber and he says: 'Why don't you check out this black Strat?' He was a massive Clapton fan and I was, too. I tried it and I remember being torn because it was magical! But I didn't buy it. I bought that green Ibanez, which I sold a few years later anyways.

"The following year or two after I got the Ibanez, I did get the other black Strat, which has become my 'number 1' throughout my life, but I still think about that one guitar. I guess it all works out as it's supposed to, though!"

My dream signature guitar…
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The best advice I've ever been given…
"I'm not really one to remember anecdotes of advice from people. But if you asked me what advice would I give to guitarists trying to become professional and make this a career, I would say: be early, be prepared, be flexible, don't be needy, be a kind person. And of course, kick serious ass on the instrument!"

My musical guilty pleasure…
"I think any music has merit, so nothing should be a guilty pleasure. Like what you like."

Can I be in the band?
"I always wanted to have a band like Led Zeppelin, so I guess I'll say Zeppelin!"

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